

MAMMOTH

JUNE 25¢
IN CANADA 30¢

MYSTERY



**THAT'S ALL
FOR YOU!**
By RAY N. WALL

*There are two funny things
about Wilmer*

The first is Wilmer's getup.

The second is that he doesn't care if he does look like a castoff scarecrow.

Because Wilmer's a lot smarter than he looks. While he's making more than he's ever made before, the dough he'd spend for a fancy wardrobe goes right smack into War Bonds . . . and for this Uncle Sam is mighty proud of him.

Naturally, you don't have to look like Wilmer . . . or tramp around in rags . . . to make your country proud of you, and your own future a whole lot more secure.

All you have to do is keep getting those War Bonds—and then forgetting them till they come due. Not bad—that four dollars for every three, and the safest investment in the world!

Why not get an *extra* War Bond today?

**BUY ALL THE BONDS YOU CAN . . .
KEEP ALL THE BONDS YOU BUY**



ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

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THE CALL BOX



REPORT BY THE EDITOR

NOW that Roy Huggins has plastered you all over with glee with his "The Double Take," we come up with another new name, Ray N. Wall, with a short novel that we think will duplicate. This year seems to be our year to discover new talent in the mystery field. Huggins, for instance, besides having his book come out in book form, wrote another one for us, a novelet this time, and sneaked it into the *Satevepost* on us. Well, far be it from us to deny that they are smart editors too! Maybe they'll be smart about Wall, after they read this issue. (We assume that they do, so's not to miss any of our discoveries!) So, when you read "That's All For You!" in this issue, you are getting 38,000 words of story that is right in the last-minute groove. It's as up-to-date as tomorrow.

TWO more new authors in this issue. Philip Sharp tells us how "Murder Pays The Tariff" in 6,000 short words; a yarn you'll find just right to fill that half-hour. Not to be outdone, H. B. Hickey uses the same number of words to spin thirty minutes on the wheel with "Roulette And Old Lace." There you have two newcomers who promise much for the future.

DAVID WRIGHT O'BRIEN, of course, is no newcomer. In fact we probably mentioned before that our files contain all too few of the manuscripts of the boy who gave his life over Germany so that you and I could be free to read yarns as good as "The Sound Of Death."

LEONARD B. ROSBOROUGH is a patient man. He comes in regularly and buys us a lunch, and then returns to his typewriter. But you'll agree that the lunches were no bribe to make us buy "Never Crowd A Mouse!" This little yarn, in the magic (for this issue) figure 6,000 class, has some of the sweetest character work we've seen in many a day. Don't miss this one.

"**F**AKE IT EASY," says Richard Brister, in his short-short. Fake or no fake, this one will be easy to take. It'll take you only about five minutes to read it, but it'll guarantee a lot more entertainment that you'd believe could be packed into five minutes.

TED STRATTON couldn't have had "The Nervous Finger" ailment when he sat down to

his typewriter to bang out his short story. This one's a deliberate and well-planned yarn with a terrific punch to it. You'll enjoy it as much as we did when we picked it out of the "slush pile."

IF YOU are a lover of good music, you'll resent the thought of "Bullets For Beethoven" but that's what the grand old master gets in the story by Larry Holden. Yes, we know Beethoven's dead, but he gets bullets just the same. Read it and see! You'll get no kicks out of this one. (That is, no kicks you can send our way!)

HOWARD BROWNE, who usually talks to you in this column, is in New York at the present moment, rounding up all of the best detective and mystery writers in the business, and from a phone call from him the other day, we judge that he's hit the jackpot. So here's a tip from us to keep your eye on the newsstands for MAMMOTH MYSTERY in the future. The magazine will have some surprises for you that you wouldn't have believed possible.

REGARDING book publication of our novels, we can give you a tip-off on the novel to appear in our July issue. It'll be out in book form immediately after you read it in MAMMOTH MYSTERY, and there goes the proof of what we predicted recently, that you'd be finding our little magazine getting the recognition you fans have been telling us it deserves. As for the new novel, we won't tell you anything about it right now because maybe Howard has some special plans about it, but we can sneak across the information that it's a long one and one of the best stories ever to appear in this magazine.

AND just to get in a plug for our sister magazine, *Mammoth Detective*, it too will have in its next issue a novel that will be available in the "king" size immediately thereafter. We've just about decided that it will be easier for us to mention those of our novels which *do not* appear in book form!

MORE good news is that *Mammoth Detective* will appear each month, and MAMMOTH MYSTERY will definitely appear every two months. When the paper and print situation eases up still more, both books will come out monthly. So keep your quarters handy so you don't miss out on any of these issues. You'll be sorry if you do. *Rap*

MAMMOTH MYSTERY



All **STORIES** *Complete*

- THAT'S ALL FOR YOU!** (Short Novel—38,000) by Ray N. Wall 6
 Illustrated by H. W. McCauley
 Lila Lane was in danger: she was followed, threatened, shot at. The reason for it was amazing . . .
- ROULETTE AND OLD LACE** (Short—6,000) by H. B. Hickey 72
 Illustrated by Brady
 When you bet your money on roulette, better make sure there isn't a bit of old lace in the game too!
- BULLETS FOR BEETHOVEN** (Short—8,000) by Larry Holden 84
 Illustrated by Arnold Kohn
 Beethoven got the bullets, but it was a cinch they weren't intended for a man who was already dead.
- THE SOUND OF DEATH** (Novelet—21,000) by David Wright O'Brien . . . 100
 Illustrated by Arnold Kohn
 The war was a thing of the past, and yet he couldn't get rid of the idea that he was going to die.
- MURDER PAYS THE TARIFF** (Short—6,000) by Philip Sharp 138
 Illustrated by William Marsh
 Jeff Baker wanted this job pretty bad, but it turned out there was a sort of tariff to be paid . . .
- NEVER CROWD A MOUSE!** (Short—6,000) by Leonard B. Rosborough 152
 Illustrated by Robert Fuqua
 Elmer Finch wasn't the kind of a guy who looked like he'd put up a scrap—but even mice have teeth.
- THE NERVOUS FINGER** (Short—3,600) by Ted Stratton 164
 Illustrated by Malcolm Smith
 When you are engaged in something that is dangerous, it isn't very helpful to have a nervous finger.
- FAKE IT EASY** (Short—1,400) by Richard Brister 172
 Illustrated by Rod Ruth
 Danny was an expert pickpocket, but this time he muffed it and had to resort to unusual measures.

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Front cover painting by Arnold Kohn illustrating a scene from "That's All for You!"
Back cover painting by Joe W. Tillotson illustrating "How Good Is Your Detective Sense?"

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MYSTERY
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Volume 2
Number 3



Cray planted a savage kick just beside the door lock



ALL FOR YOU

By **RAY N. WALL**

IT shouldn't have been an overly difficult job to protect Colonel Bumont's niece—but Cray found out the job was one that might "finish" him!



**COMPLETE
BOOK-LENGTH
NOVEL**

COLONEL ALBERT BUMONT banged his big fist on the smooth mahogany of his desk. He had telephoned my office that morning and asked me to call on him at two o'clock.

"Cray!" he roared. "Somebody's bothering my niece. It has to be stopped!"

"Attorney and Counselor-at-Law" read the gilt letters on Bumont's private office door. He was a huge hulk of a man. His great frame, draped in a white linen suit, loomed above his desk. His large, lined face was red.

"The spectacular Miss Lane?" I questioned. "Who's bothering her, and how?"

"Who? That's what I sent for you to find out," he snorted. "How? She's been followed, threatened, shot at. Look at these."

Colonel Bumont reached into the top drawer of his desk and pulled out three letters. He also produced a box of cigars, chose a perfecto, and as an afterthought pushed the box toward me.

"Nope," I said. "I chew. It's the only act of vice that doesn't hamper a dick."

Bumont lit his cigar with none too steady a hand. I bit off a chunk of plug, looked around for a cuspidor, and inspected the letters.

The envelopes were addressed to Miss Lila Lane, Ferry Road, City, and had been postmarked at the Central Station on July 9th, 15th and 20th, respectively. I opened them and spread out their contents. The letters, unsigned, were all printed on cheap dime-store paper, impossible to trace.

Unless you follow our instructions (the first note read) you are marked for death. Get \$50,000 in small used bills. Keep them in the safe in your house. We will tell you what to do next.

"Has Miss Lane a safe at home?" I asked.

"A small one, in her bedroom."

"Did she?"

"Did she what? Draw out the money? She did not," Bumont grunted. His bushy gray eyebrows twitched.

Don't try any monkey business (the next note ordered). We mean what we say. Have the money ready within the next five days or pick out a casket.

The final note was definite.

Friday evening, July 22nd, make a package of the \$50,000. Leave your house alone with the package in your roadster at exactly eight P.M. Drive straight west on Ferry Road 6.3 miles beyond the city limit sign. You will see an empty filling station on the right. Leave the package at the door, drive home and forget it. Otherwise, if you fail to do this, or if you notify the police, you will die soon and unpleasantly.

"Looks like the job had been well cased," I reflected, "by some one who had considerable inside dope. But why pay a private dick," I asked Bumont, "when the police or the F.B.I. would handle this?"

Bumont squinted at me through the smoke of his cigar. His gray eyes were pouched and bloodshot in his big red face.

"I daren't, Cray," he explained. "Lila's being shadowed. Men have been seen in the shrubbery around the

house. Two days after the first note came she was driving alone out Broad Street Road. A sedan passed her, cut in, forced her almost off the road and then pulled out and roared away. Two nights after she received the second note a bullet was fired from outside through her bedroom window and shattered the mirror of her dressing table. If I call in the police or the G-men, I'm afraid she will be killed. I thought, with your connections, you could find out if there are any strange gangsters in town. If you locate them and decide suspicion justifies it, we can call in the police. Meanwhile, you could arrange for her protection."

"Tomorrow night is set for the payoff," I said. "If you think they mean business, why not pay—with marked money, of course—and then hunt them down?"

"Lila won't. She's a stubborn wench and there's no scare in her. I want you to talk to her yourself."

BUMONT glared at his watch, then reached for the desk phone. His big mottled hand, the unsteady hand of a heavy drinker, shook a little as he clumsily spun the dial in slow, full sweeps of one finger.

"Lila?" he spoke into the phone. "Mike Cray, the detective I told you about, is here in my office. I want to bring him out to see you."

He handed me the phone.

"Hello," I said.

"Mr. Cray?" The voice was feminine. "Uncle Al thinks I ought to see you. I think it's all nonsense, but I will, of course. Could you come out this afternoon?"

"Sure," I said. "What time?"

"About five would suit me nicely."

"Okay by me," I said. "I'll be on hand at five."

I handed the phone back to Bumont.

"I'll come with him, Lila," he added, and hung up.

"Wise me up a little more on the lay-out," I suggested.

Bumont studied the ash on his cigar.

"As you and every one in town knows, Cray," he began, "Lila Lane is my niece. Her father—"

"Your brother?" I broke in.

"No, I'm her mother's brother. Lila's parents were killed in a motor accident a few years ago. Her father was a rich man. The money goes to Lila on her twenty-first birthday, August 14th, this year. I am her nearest relative, her guardian and the administrator of her father's estate."

"How much is the pot?"

Bumont's bloodshot eyes blinked at me through the smoke of his cheroot. He shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Hard to say without an accounting. A lot of stuff her father bought prior to 1929 has depreciated since his death and has never recovered. It is plenty, though."

"What does Miss Lane have now?"

"The income, subject to my discretion."

"And what does that run to?"

"I don't see that the amount is relevant," Bumont scowled. "She isn't—she hasn't been hampered for funds."

"I reckon not. What happens to the estate if she's bumped off, Colonel?"

Bumont had been on the governor's staff some years before.

"It would be something of a problem," he said. "Lane, suddenly killed, left no will. The court appointed me administrator. Neither has Lila made a will, although I have frequently urged her to do so. In case of her death intestate, the property would be thrown into the courts again and eventually divided among her relatives."

"Who are they, besides yourself?" I asked.

"Oh, a flock of kinfolk," Bumont said vaguely

"Any of 'em live in town?"

"Philip Lane Sims, a cousin. Roger Lane, Lila's father, was married twice. Sims is the son of the first wife's sister.

"He holds down a desk at Lane & Company, of which the estate owns a majority of the stock. Lila insisted he have the job. He's a no-good loafer and a pain in the neck.

"Then," he went on, "there is Mrs. Renwick, a widow who was a Lane, a cousin, who lives with Lila as a sort of companion."

"Who else is in the family?"

"No one, except distant relatives. Lila and Mrs. Renwick live in the old Lane home on Ferry Road, just inside the city limits. The staff consists of a cook, a maid, and a chauffeur, all white. In addition there is a colored gardener and handyman, who does not live on the lot."

"I expect I'll want to chat with the servants," I said. "I might get a lead from one of them. And who are Miss Lane's friends? Is she engaged, or anything?"

"What do you mean—or anything?" Bumont grated.

IN THESE cases, it's a good plan to know something about the threatened person's love life, if any," I told him.

"Naturally, Lila has had plenty of affairs," said the Colonel. "She is not a beauty, but she is smart and full of life, and, with her money, men naturally flock about her like dopes around a slot machine. No formal engagement has ever been announced but one has been rumored several times."

"Who seems to be running first with her now?"

"Stanley Gebson takes up a lot of her time," Bumont said. "He is one of the

vice-presidents of the Third National."

"Yeah. I know him by sight. Big desk and few duties, I imagine. Bit of a sport, ain't he? And money of his own?"

"Nothing more than his salary," Bumont said. "He is an athlete, a fine-looking fellow, belongs to the Hunt Club, the Boat Club, the Country Club, and so forth, and is more than a bit of a ladies' man."

"Any other important candidates?"

"You can ask Lila when you see her," Bumont said, "but why all this catechism? You don't think any of her friends are behind these threats, do you? Looks like gangster stuff to me."

"Whoever wrote those notes knows Miss Lane well or got the dope from some one who does. I want to find out all you know about any one who comes into the picture. I need all the background I can get."

I shifted my quid and looked the Colonel in the eye.

"You don't know any gangsters, do you? Then just tell me what you do know about her acquaintances and associates and I'll look after the mobster angle in my own way."

Bumont heaved his heavy body up from the desk.

"Lila has plenty of friends, or hangers-on, if you like, but you can get all that from her. She said five o'clock. It's after two now and I'm due in court. I'll meet you at her house at five. You know where it is?"

"Yeah. Okay by me," I said and got up too.

"Think you can do anything?" Bumont growled.

"I can make it look so as long as I'm on the payroll," I said.

"Don't worry about that. You can bill me. I don't care what you charge if you can clean this up. See you at Lila's at five."

At the cigar counter in the lobby of the building I leafed through the telephone book and jotted down Miss Lane's phone number, 3-1312, and the number of her house on Ferry Road. Then I drove back to my office.

CHAPTER II

MY OFFICE was empty when I entered it, except for Arden Leslie, who answers the phone, keeps the books, writes my infrequent letters and tells me how to run the business. I got her straight from business college. She has never worked anywhere else and she's convinced she's God's own gift to the detective racket.

I hung up my hat, parked my number tens on my desk and bit off a fresh chew.

"Arden," I began, "what do you know about Lila Lane?"

Arden is about pocket-size, with curly reddish-brown hair, lively brown eyes, a slim round body and neat legs. She is very pleasant to look at but not always restful to listen to.

She swung around from her typewriter and crossed those shapely gams. She had on a green-and-white-striped dress that made me think of a mint julep.

"Plenty," she said pertly. "We were at John Marshall High together a couple of years. Afterward Lila went north to a finishing school and I went to business college—and look what that led to for me!"

"The subject is Lila Lane," I reminded her. "I know all about you."

"Think so?" Arden tilted a saucy chin. "Well, Lila's a blonde, about five feet four, with a beautiful figure and a not so beautiful face. She's smart, full of pep, and has always had a flock of boys after her. Since her parents were killed, she's been all over the world with Mrs. Renwick, that cousin of hers, as a

chaperon. Pretty soft. I calls it. Lila goes in a good bit for sports: she golfs, plays tennis, swims, rides, even drives a plane."

"How's her disposition?"

"What would you expect, with all her money? Rotten. Rotten spoiled. She's stubborn as a mule and quick-tempered as a cat."

"Figured in any scandals?" I broke in.

"Nothing very bad, Mike. Of course, a girl that gets around, and one with so much jack, gets talked about. She's extremely modern and professes to be a pagan. She made a trip to Bermuda with Ralph Egmont, the flier. She runs with a very swift set. She has a camp over in Chesterfield, where there's supposed to be some pretty heavy drinking and necking done, and there has been talk of midnight swimming parties sans bathing suits."

"You wouldn't know personally, I presume?"

"You wouldn't want a gal to incriminate herself?" Arden giggled. "No; while Lila still knows me on the street, I don't rate her parties."

Arden stopped and sighed.

"Hell to be poor, ain't it?" I grinned. Arden hadn't always been poor. Her old man had plenty of sugar up to the depression. He hung on for a while but he couldn't take it. They found him in his garage with the doors closed and the motor of his car running. After that Arden entered business school.

"Oh, it's not so bad while a girl has her health and good looks," Arden said cheerfully. "This business life has its compensations. Look at all the fun I have running the office. And, of course, Mike, knowing you is a liberal education."

"The pleasure is all mine," I assured her. "Know any reason why any one would want to bump off Lila?"

"Heavens, no! Does some one?"

"So her guardian says."

"That old tub of lard, Colonel Bumont?"

"Yeah. You don't like the Colonel?"

"I do not," Arden stuck out her tongue. "He's one of those arm-squeezers and back-patters that thinks he can get away with it because he does it in a fatherly manner. Why do old men like to paw girls, Mike?"

"Same reason young men like to, I reckon," I said. "It gives them a thrill."

"Maybe the old clowns get one, but they don't give one," said Arden sagely.

"You would know I imagine," I answered. "Is the Colonel single, married or a widower?"

"NEITHER one nor t'other," Arden said. "He's divorced, and I understand that his ex stuck him for a fat and juicy alimony. She's out in California and he lives in lonely but palatial splendor at the Jefferson. He is said to play very stiff poker with his cronies and he also throws fancy parties for the younger folks in Lila's set, I hear."

"A gay old dog, eh?" I said. "Do you know a young man named Phillip Sims?"

"Lila's cousin? Slightly. What about him?"

"He'd come into some coin if she croaked, I'm told."

"I wouldn't know about that," Arden said. "Phil Sims is not a pleasant person. He has a peevish hate on the world. He's the poor but proud type and too lazy to do anything about it. Sneers at the hoi polloi and likely presses his own pants. He's an intellectual—considers himself one of the literati."

"Bumont says Stanley Gebson is that way about Lila," I told her. "Know him, too?"

"Sure. Stanley and I were born on the same block," Arden replied. "Now he's one of the swift set that Lila runs with and I seldom see him. They might be engaged; I don't know. She's seen with him a good deal, I hear, but so is she with Jim Harrison and Tully Marshall and Tug Randolph and a lot of others."

"Who's her best girl friend?"

Arden made a face. "With her disposition and penchant for monopolizing men, she hasn't got any. Lila and Margery Twitchell are fairly close. They are both athletic. Frances Hawkes went to Europe with Lila and Mrs. Renwick one summer. She's the arty type. Mrs. Moberly Jones, who was Emma Lee Davis, used to go out to Lila's camp with Moberly quite often, I think, but lately there's been some sort of a row, or so I heard. What's all this about, anyhow?"

"I dunno," I said. "I'm just shooting around in the dark." I told Arden about the letters.

"Surely you don't suspect her friends of writing that sort of thing?" Arden cried.

"Nope, not exactly. Probably some mob, professional or amateur. But nobody starts a job like this without some dope, and if I find out all I can about Lila and her friends, perhaps I can figure out where the dope came from, see? If you ask enough questions, the law of averages is going to give you some answers. Simple detection, in ten easy lessons, kid."

"I hope you catch whoever wrote those letters, Mike," said Arden, her eyes shining with interest. "Lila's no longer what I'd call a friend, but I wouldn't want to see her hurt, or robbed even."

"Oh, the rich rate their troubles," I told her carelessly. "Keeps 'em down on the same plane with us poor folks. Otherwise the world would be too darn

uneven."

As I sat at my desk I had been playing with the phone, spinning the dial in different combinations without raising the receiver.

"What are you doing, Mike?" Arden questioned. "You give me the willies, twiddling that dial. Do you want me to get you a number?"

"Nope. I just like to play with things," I told her vaguely. "I'm going out to the Lane house with the Colonel at five and there's something I want to see about first. Get hold of Terry Wood, will you, Arden? Tell him I want him to dig up all he can on Phillip Sims and to see me at my hotel tonight. You can close up as usual. I won't be back. If anything comes up this afternoon that I ought to know before morning, call me after supper at the hotel, will you?"

"Sure, Mike," Arden twinkled. "Give Lila my love."

CHAPTER III

IT WAS about four o'clock when I drove my Chevvy into Hank Griffin's tourist camp on Broad Street Road just at the city limits. At Hank's you could get your car serviced, your face fed and your throat moistened with whatever you wanted to wet it with. You could dance with your own dame or with one of Hank's hostesses. For a wind up, if a couple wanted to rent one of the cabins that stood discreetly back among the trees, nobody asked to see the marriage license.

Hank was a tall, raw-boned, lantern-jawed North Carolinian, who, before prohibition, ran a tough saloon on Seventeenth Street. During the so-called dry years, Hank had been a bootlegger. Perhaps he could be considered one now, for only the state stores were supposed to sell hard liquor and only in

the original package, but Hank sold it to those he knew by the bottle or by the drink.

In his bootlegging days Hank had served a stretch or two in Federal pens and he still continued the contacts he had made. I knew that if any foreign gangs were operating in town, Hank would likely be wise. I didn't think any of the local hoodlums were likely to try to put the bite on Miss Lane. I knew I could count on Hank for any info he had, or anything else. Once in the Argonne I had pulled him into a shell hole when he couldn't crawl in himself. Hank wasn't the kind either to say much about it or ever to forget it.

I found Hank behind the bar, which ran the length of one side of the big front room of his joint. The bar faced the restaurant and behind both stretched the dance floor. It was quiet. A couple of waitresses lounged about the restaurant. In one of the booths at the side a couple of girls sat drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. Otherwise the dump seemed empty.

I bellied up to the bar. "Got a cold bottle of coke?" I asked.

"Hi, big-tough-and-ugly!" Hank greeted me. His eyes were a cold light blue, but his grin made his face pleasant when he felt that way. "Still on the wagon?"

"I finished my share of the world's liquor when you were a wet-nosed pup," I said. "How's biz these days?"

"Swell. The place is packed with suckers spending folding money every night."

"Glad to hear it. My dad used to say that industry and honesty would always bring success. Say, Hank, you seen or heard of any strange mobsters in town lately?"

As I spoke, a curious expression stiffened Hank's lean features, and he looked past me.

"Looks like a car full of them now," he said.

I whirled around. A dingy black Packard had drawn up to one of the tanks outside. Hank's gas monkey, rag in hand, was at the windshield. Two guys sat in the front of the heap. Two more were on their way in.

The one ahead was a short hairy-looking gorilla in blue serge. The other bird, tall and thin, wore a soiled light flannel suit. They crossed the floor as quick and light as a couple of cats. The stubby guy, with a smooth easy motion of his right hand, produced an automatic from his left arm-pit.

"Reach for the sky!" he ordered. "This is a stick-up!"

HANK reached. I reached, the pop bottle still in my right hand. The gorilla was between me and the thin guy, who also had a gun out. I swung the bottle down hard on the gorilla's skull and at the same time, kicked him hard in the groin. They learned us things like that in France. A slug from his automatic tore into the ceiling as he fell back against the slim guy and before they could get untangled Hank had leaped the bar and pasted the thin bird with a bung-starter. Then both yeggs were in a heap on the floor and Hank and I stood over them, guns in our hands, for I had grabbed the gorilla's automatic and Hank had snatched up the other one.

The punk at the wheel of the Packard gave it the gas and it roared away. The girls in the restaurant were screaming in various keys. The cook burst out of the kitchen and the gas monkey came running in with a spanner.

I wiped my face and took a chew of tobacco.

Hank was mad. He kicked each of the lugs a couple of times in the slats.

"Mabel," he rasped at one of the

waitresses, "stop that yellin' and phone for the wagon. If this ain't somethin'! And me tryin' to run a nice quiet place!"

"Know 'em?" I asked.

"Never seen either of the dirty so-and-sos before," Hank raged. "Tryin' to pull a stunt likt that on *me!* Hopped to the eyebrows, I reckon. Coarse work. Let's frisk 'em before the cops get here."

He laid the mallet on the bar and went deftly through their clothes. He dug a pair of brass knuckles from the gorilla, who had begun to writhe painfully, and got a black jack off the thin guy, who was out cold. From the gorilla's pocket he also extracted a diamond bracelet and a couple of rings set with large and handsome stones.

"Pretty nice ice!" Hank said carefully.

Then we heard the siren and a moment later the cops came plunging in, Sergeant Danny Hogan in front.

"What goes on?" he wanted to know.

"There's some cold meat for you, Danny." Hank pointed toward the men on the floor. "Four hoods drove up in a Packard. Two of them tried to pull a heist. Them two. The other pair stepped on the gas and beat it."

"Didya get the number?" growled Hogan.

"Didya?" Hank repeated to the open-mouthed gas monkey.

"Naw, Sarge," gasped the kid, who was white as paper. "I think it was a Maryland plate, but it all happened so fast I never noticed the figures none."

"You wouldn't," sneered the sergeant. "Nobody ever tries to help us cops."

He looked at the figures on the floor.

"You kill 'em, Hank?"

"Nix," Hank said disgustedly. "Mike knocked out one of them with a pop bottle and I sapped the other with a mallet.

They ain't hurt much. You can't hurt a coked-up hood."

"Know either of 'em, Danny?" I asked.

"Not off hand, Mike. We'll print 'em and maybe Washington can tell us who they are if their prints ain't in our files. Put some bracelets on 'em, boys, and get 'em out of here."

The cops loaded the hoods into the wagon. We gave Danny the two guns we had taken, the knucks and the black-jack, the rings and the bracelet.

"Looks as if they might have just pulled something," Hogan said. "You went through them, I take it?" he asked sharply.

"Sure," Hank said, and winked at me. "They might have come to and we didn't want to take a chance on their having any more weapons. You can see why, Danny."

"Didn't they have any money on them?" persisted Hogan incredulously.

"Naw," Hank lied. "Probably they was broke and that's why they tried this play."

"Sez you," grunted Hogan, and went his way.

Hank laughed.

"Didn't I see some long money in your fist after you went through them?" I asked.

"Sure you did," Hank said, grinning. "It ain't no crime to clean a crook that tries to stick you up, is it? I reckon there might be a reward out on 'em and I'm collecting in advance. It was only a couple of bucks, anyhow."

"It's okay by me," I said. "Got another cold bottle of coke? The other one got spilled."

"Sure," said Hank, still grinning, "and it's on the house. All paid for," and he patted his pants pocket.

I finished the coke, went out and got in the Chevvy and drove slowly to the Lane house.

CHAPTER IV

THE Lane house on Ferry Road was just inside the city limits. The grounds covered almost half a block. No other house stood near. Old man Lane had bought the land when it was cheap and had built a handsome three-story brick mansion in the southern Colonial style with big columns and wide porches. A lot of shrubbery and a good many trees gave it considerable privacy.

A crescent-shaped drive led from the street to the front door and an extension wound around behind the house. I was parking my Chevy at the side of the drive when Bumont rolled up in his Lincoln.

"You're a bit late," he said as he climbed stiffly out.

"So are you," I retorted. It was quarter past five.

"Had a heavy day in court. Been there since I left you," he growled.

We went up the steps together and Bumont rang. We waited. No one answered.

"Hell, somebody must be home," grunted Bumont and held his finger on the bell button. Still no one came.

"That's funny," he muttered and after a moment tried the door. The latch was off and the door opened.

"Careless!" he grumbled, put the latch back on and shouldered his way in with me behind him.

The front door opened into a wide hall that led straight through the house. On the right were double parlors, furnished in fine old mahogany. On the left, the room in front was lined with books and all decked out in the latest style with chromium, plate glass and steel.

"The library?" I asked, as I peered through the doorway at the book-laden shelves.

"The bar room," snorted the Colonel

"Mighty little reading done around here."

He went over to a shelf, turned a handle and pulled. The shelf revolved smoothly and a tricky little bottle-laden bar appeared as pretty as you please.

The Colonel picked up a bottle of Bourbon and a couple of glasses.

"Have a shot?" he invited.

"Don't use it," I told him. "Consumed my quota long ago."

Bumont gave a contemptuous sort of a snort and poured out and downed a stiff slug.

No one showed, so we looked into the rear room at the left, which was the dining room and into the kitchen and pantries at the back of the house.

"Funny business, everybody out and the front door unlocked," grumbled the Colonel. "With Lila expecting us, too. I don't like it. Let's take a look upstairs."

From the front hall, two graceful stairways rose at each side to join at the second floor landing. I followed Bumont as he panted his way up.

"Lila's like all young folks today," he puffed. "No consideration whatever. Time and appointments mean nothing when—"

He stopped, as if struck, on the threshold of a front corner room. Evidently it was Miss Lane's bedroom, for a girl that I took to be Lila Lane lay, half naked, upon a Persian rug in the middle of the floor.

"Good God!" cried Bumont. "They didn't wait. They got her!"

"Somebody got her," I agreed.

I WALKED around the Colonel and bent over the girl. She lay flat on her back, her arms and legs asprawl. A small round hole starred the middle of her forehead. No powder burns showed and not a great deal of blood.

I knelt and touched her wrist, then

her bare breast. She was cold and stiff. I saw no bruises, and, as I looked about, no weapon and no signs of a struggle.

"Dead?" Bumont groaned. "My God, I should have acted earlier!"

"Yeah," I said. "She's dead as a door-nail. Been dead several hours."

"Several hours? We talked to her about two o'clock."

"Then she must have been shot immediately afterward. She's stiff."

Bumont's heavy red face was a mixture of pain and horror. Sweat stood out all over it and he was shaking. We looked at the body in silence. Apparently Miss Lane had been interrupted while dressing, for she had on nothing but a brief pair of flesh-colored pants, cobwebby beige stockings rolled tight above the knees and a pair of black satin mules. A maroon-and-white print dress lay on the bed.

"Did she generally wear any trinkets?" I asked Bumont.

"By God, they're gone," he swore. "She almost always wore a diamond bracelet and two or three handsome rings."

My mind flashed back to the stuff Hank had taken from the gorilla's pocket.

Lila Lane's face had not been beautiful but the body that lay there was lovely. The breasts were round and firm and the out-thrust legs tapered sweetly from ankle to thigh as the smooth arms tapered from wrist to shoulder. The face, with the too-heavy chin and the rather ugly nose seemed to express resentment and surprise.

Bumont picked up a heavy Chinese robe that lay across a chair and covered the girl's body.

"Don't touch anything else," I warned him. "We'll have to call the cops."

"Yes. I can't understand what has become of all the servants."

"Who are they, anyhow?"

"Lila had a maid, a rather pretty French girl, Claire—Claire Rigaud, I believe her name is; Mrs. Tankin, a middle-aged woman who has cooked for the family for years, and Charles Beele, the chauffeur. He hasn't been with her very long. They all live on the place. A colored man named Abe Jones comes in by the day to look after the yard and do odd jobs. And, of course there is Maude Renwick, Lila's cousin, who acts as housekeeper and companion. I can't imagine where they all are."

"I hope there are no more corpses about," I said grimly. "I think we'd better take a gander."

AS WE turned toward the hall, we heard the front door open. Heels clicked on the stairs and two women came up. They saw us and came on to the door where we stood. The younger, a good-looking blonde doll, quite smartly dressed, put her hand over her mouth as she saw the body and began to yell. The other, a fat, dowdy middle-aged woman stared in a pop-eyed stupor.

"Shut up, Claire," ordered the Colonel roughly. "Where have you two been? Where's Mrs. Renwick? Where's Charles?"

"What has happened to my poor lamb?" panted the fat woman. I took her to be the cook.

"Where have you two been?" roared the Colonel.

"This was Claire's day off," the cook explained sullenly. "She asked me last night to go to the picture show with her today. Miss Lila had said she was going with Miss Twitchell to the Country Club for lunch and would not need us. We left a little after twelve. Charles drove us downtown and was to meet us outside Loew's at three. He never showed up."

"She was killed after twelve, then," I said.

"After two," corrected Bumont. "It was just about two when we talked to her. Where's Mrs. Renwick?"

"She went out just before we did," said the maid. "I don't know where she went."

"The cops will want in on this," I told Bumont. "Will you call them, or shall I?"

"Go ahead and do it," grunted Bumont. He pulled out a great square of scarlet silk and wiped his face.

I picked up the French phone from a small stand near the bed and when I got my number I asked for Frank Finch, the captain of detectives. As I waited I again noted the number of Miss Lane's phone—3-1312.

"Frank? This is Mike Cray. Colonel Bumont and I are at the Lane home on Ferry Road. Lila Lane, his niece and ward, has been shot. Shot dead. How soon can you have your squad out?"

"Less'n ten minutes, Mike," Finch answered. "We're on the way right now."

"One second, Frank. You got those two lugs that tried to pull a heist out at Hank Griffin's place? Hang on to them. There might be a hook-up."

"All right. Be out in ten minutes."

I put back the receiver. "They'll be here directly," I said. "Don't any of you touch anything. The cops will want to go over the room for prints, and much good I expect it'll do 'em."

"What was that you said over the phone about holding somebody?" Bumont asked anxiously.

I told him briefly what had happened at Griffin's and a satisfied expression spread over his stern features.

"By God," he said. "I'll bet it's the same gang."

"Could be," I agreed.

"Can't we be doing something?" Bu-

mont wanted to know. He had sunk down in a big chair and was chewing viciously on an unlighted cigar, to my secret envy. The little French girl seemed about to have hysterics. The fat cook stood stolidly, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Take that kid in the bathroom and give her a shot of ammonia or something," I told the cook. "Get hold of yourselves, both of you. The cops will want to ask you some questions."

I turned to Bumont. "You want me to stay on the case after the cops take over?"

"I wish you would, Cray," he answered earnestly. "I want whoever did this caught and convicted. To the police it will be just another case, a routine matter, part of the day's work. I want you to give it all your time and thought until it is cleared up. Poor Lila!"

"Is this the room into which the shot was fired?" I asked.

"What shot?"

"The one you told me about that happened ten days or so ago. Broke a mirror, you said."

"Oh, that. What just occurred had blotted it from my mind. It was apparently fired from the shrubbery through that side window"—Bumont pointed—"and went through the glass above her dressing table. It's been fixed, of course."

I WENT over and pushed aside the table. A patch of fresh paper showed behind it.

"What became of the bullet?" I inquired.

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Bumont. "What does it matter?"

"I'd like to see if it came from the same gun that killed her," I said.

"How could you check that? No gun is in sight. The murderer doubtless took

it away."

"Sure," I admitted, "but it may turn up. Guns do. I took one off that gorilla this afternoon. The bullet that killed the girl ought to be in this room somewhere and if it is, we'll find it. If we can find the other we can compare the two. If they match, it would prove that the guys who made the threats did the killing."

"I see," Bumont said, swabbing his sweaty face again.

"Let's go downstairs," I suggested. "We'll have to let the cops in and I'd like to walk around the outside of the house."

Bumont heaved himself up and we went down. We opened the front door and walked around the house. It was square except for the projecting wing of the kitchen. On the west side a porch ran all along the house; on the east a screened, glassed-in sun room opened from the rear parlor. The kitchen door was unfastened but the outside doors on each side were locked.

In the rear of the house roses and a lot of flowers I don't know the names of were in bloom among shrubs and trees. The drive led to a two-car garage, obviously converted from a stable which had been built in the days when they put gables and towers on them. One space was vacant; in the other stood a slick blue roadster with a convertible top.

"Lila's personal car," Bumont explained. "I'd like to know what has become of Charles and the Packard."

A flagstone walk wound from the kitchen door to a lane at the back of the lot. The lane ran parallel to Ferry Road. A gate, latched but unlocked, opened on the lane.

Then we heard the siren and the cops drove up in two cars. Finch had a couple of plain-clothes men with him, a fingerprint man and a photographer, as well as a single harness bull. Finch posted

the uniformed cop at the door and the rest of us passed into the hall.

Frank Finch, chief of detectives, was in his middle forties. He was short and stocky, with clear-cut, intelligent features, a deceptively mild manner and a penetrating eye. Frank and I had been in the same company in France. After the war, we pounded adjacent beats for awhile, some twenty years before. He had risen from the ranks, while I pulled out to start my own agency, but we had remained pals.

"Well, Colonel," Finch said in his pleasant voice, "from what Mike told me, this is a shocking piece of business. What do you know about it?"

"Miss Lane, my niece, you know, made an appointment with Cray and me to meet her here at five," Bumont explained. His big hands were so unsteady that he made hard work of lighting a fresh cigar. "We arrived a few moments after five to find the front door unlocked, the servants out, and Lila dead—shot—on her bedroom floor."

"Shocking," repeated Finch. "Mike came out with you to see her, you say?"

"Yes. Lila had received several threatening letters recently. 'I'll show them to you later. Some one has been trying to frighten her. She laughed about it, but I wanted Cray to look into it and she agreed to see him. So we came out—too late.'"

AS WE stood in the hall, Dr. Robards, the medical examiner, drove up in his little coupe and we all went upstairs. Bumont led the way into the bedroom where the body lay. The doctor drew aside the Chinese robe. He placed his hand above the heart for an instant, tested the rigor of the sprawled limbs, raised the head and looked at the ragged hole where the bullet had torn its way out.

"How long has she been dead, Doc?" Finch asked softly.

"I can't tell exactly. *Rigor mortis* varies, as you know well enough. Not less than two hours, I should say; not more than four. A single bullet, from a .38 I think, went straight through the frontal bone and on out. It should be in the room somewhere."

"No indications of suicide?" Finch murmured.

"Not that I can see," said Robards shortly. "No powder burns around the wound. You found a weapon?"

Finch looked at me and I shook my head.

"Of course Lila didn't shoot herself," broke in Bumont testily. "She had everything to live for."

"You'd say she was shot between one and three, then, Doc?" Finch asked.

"She was alive at two," Bumont put in. "Cray and I both talked to her over the phone just about that time."

"That's possible enough," said Robards. "Put it between two and three. A post-mortem will show the state of her digestion, and if we can learn when she ate last, I can fix the time pretty certainly, although I think between two and three is near enough. Nothing more I can do here, Captain."

"No," Finch agreed. "You can let me have a complete post-mortem report in the morning; the wagon will be here soon."

"Is an autopsy necessary?" Bumont questioned.

"It's always best in a homicide case," Finch stated. "When we get the lug that did it, as we will, the doctor's testimony will be needed in court and he might be asked all sorts of questions."

Finch turned to his men. "Wilkes," he ordered, "go over everything for prints. Fowler, make your pictures.

Bunt, you and Dobson see if you can find the bullet. No trace of the gun, Mike?"

"Not unless it is one of those we took off the stick-up men at Hank Griffin's place," I said. "Hogan took those in. And the bracelet and rings we got at the same time and also turned over to Hogan may prove to be Miss Lane's. She usually wore such things and there are none on the body."

"We'll be able to check the guns if we can find the bullet that filled her," said Finch positively.

"While you're at it," I suggested, "have your boys dig for one that was fired into the room through a window a week or so ago." I showed him the place.

"All right," Finch agreed, and turned to Bumont.

"Did Miss Lane live alone?" he asked.

"Except for a cousin and companion, Mrs. Renwick, and the servants: maid, cook and chauffeur. The maid and cook had the afternoon off. They came in after we did. Neither Mrs. Renwick nor the chauffeur has returned."

"I'll want to talk to them all," said Finch. "Where are the two women?"

CHAPTER V

BUMONT stepped to the wall and pushed a button. In a moment the maid appeared. She had changed into her black uniform and touched up her face. Her eyes, which she kept carefully averted from the body, were red, but she seemed calm enough.

"This is Claire Rigaud, Captain Finch," Bumont explained. "Lila's personal maid."

"Let's go in another room," suggested Finch, so with Bumont leading, Finch and the maid and I followed him across the hall to a sitting-room which the

girl said was used by Mrs. Renwick.

Finch put his hat on a table and smoothed his thinning hair.

"Sit down, Miss Claire," he said in his friendly way. "I want to ask you a few questions. This is just routine," he went on as her nervous fingers knotted the corner of her frilly white apron, "nothing to be scared about. You are French, I take it? How long have you been in this country?"

The girl parked her trim figure in a big chintz-covered chair. With her feet in high-heeled pumps barely touching the floor, she looked almost childish.

"I've been in America nearly ten years, *monsieur le capitaine*," she said. "I was a war orphan. I lived with an aunt and after the franc fell, she decided we would go to New York. Two years later she died and friends obtained me a place with Miss Lane."

"Good job, liked it all right?"

"*Oui, m'sieur*. I have no complaint to make. Miss Lane was difficult to please sometimes, but usually she was a kind employer." The tears began to gather in her eyes again.

"When did you last see her alive?"

"About noon today. I had the afternoon off. Miss Lane had planned to lunch with Miss Twitchell at the Country Club and as she would not need either of us, I had asked Mrs. Tankin to go with me to the picture show. Charles drove us down to Loew's and was to bring us back but he did not appear, which is why we took so long to return."

"Do you know what jewelry Miss Lane had here?" Finch questioned.

"She kept most of her best pieces downtown at the bank but she had here a necklace of small pearls, a diamond bracelet, the rings she usually wore and some little things."

"Did you notice what she was wearing when you left?"

"I think she had on the bracelet and her rings."

"Did she have a safe here?" Finch asked.

"A small wall safe behind a picture in her room."

"You know the combination?"

"*Oui, m'sieur*."

"Let's go and open it, then, please."

Back in Miss Lane's room, Claire swung aside a small ugly painting, turned the knob and opened the safe. Inside we found the pearl necklace and a few trinkets.

"Do you know if she had any money here?" Finch queried.

"This morning Mr. Gebson of the bank phoned Miss Lane and ask if he might see her between twelve and one. She told him he might, but to be sure to be here before one, as she expected to go out with Miss Twitchell. She asked him to bring her a thousand dollars, in new twenty dollar bills, for which she would give him her check."

"A grand, eh?" Finch whistled. "Did he bring it?"

"I do not know, *monsieur le capitaine*. We left before he arrived."

"We'll check on that," Finch said softly and turned to Bumont. "Why would she want so much dough?"

"Lila liked to carry around a considerable sum in cash," the Colonel grunted. "It was a silly habit, for which I often scolded her. A thousand was nothing to her. And she was foolish about always having new bills from the bank."

CLAIRE stood, still fiddling with her apron. Finch looked around. On the dressing table lay a large handsome white leather handbag. Finch picked it up and opened it. The contents were such as a girl usually carries, but included not a cent of cash.

"They got the thousand, if Gebson

brought it," growled Bumont, "and I presume he did. It was robbery, of course, and I believe you have the men who did it, Finch."

"Very likely," Finch agreed, "and we'll look into that angle as soon as we finish here."

"It looks like the gorilla had her jewelry all right," I said. "We'll have to get Miss Rigaud to identify it. But the yegg didn't have any part of a thousand bucks."

Finch cocked a quizzical eye at me. "You made sure of that, eh, Mike?"

I grinned. "Hank Griffin did," I answered.

Fowler was packing up his camera. "I've made the pictures, Cap," he reported.

"Check," said Finch. "Take the films down and develop them. . . What about finger prints, Wilkes?"

"Plenty of them present," the expert answered, "but probably most of them are her own or the servants'. I'll want to print both the women and the chauffeur, when he shows up. I should also get the companion's—Mrs. Renwick—you said?" He looked at Colonel Bumont.

Bumont nodded.

"I'm about through here," Wilkes continued. "I'll get the doorknob when I go out."

"I expect mine will be on that," said Bumont, "and Cray's should be on the telephone. I don't know whether we touched anything else or not."

"We'll check on all that," Finch said mildly. "You can get the maid's and the cook's prints in a moment, Wilkes. Take one while I'm taking the other. You have Miss Lane's? I don't suppose the Colonel will object to giving you his. Mike's I reckon we have on file.

"Now, Miss Claire," he said to the maid, "let's go back in the other room. I want to ask you one or two more

things."

We seated ourselves again in Mrs. Renwick's quarters and Finch continued:

"Do you know any reason, Miss Claire, why any one would have wanted to kill Miss Lane?"

"*Non, mon Dieu, non!*" She seemed startled. "Is it not plain that it was the robber?"

"Probably. You don't know any one who was sore at her?"

CLAIRE shrugged a pair of shapely shoulders.

"Oh, I would not know. I do not think of any one one mad enough to kill her. Miss Lane was very quick-tempered. She had her little spats with people. She had a fuss with Miss Twitchell last week, she was angry with Mr. Gebson over something that happened last night, and that wretched cousin of hers, Mr. Sims, has been bothering her for money. But one does not kill for those things."

"Miss Lane seems to have been a bit of a spit-fire," commented Finch amiably. "When did the row with Mr. Sims take place?"

"Oh, it wasn't a row, *mon capitaine*," Claire corrected. "He's always borrowing money from her or trying to borrow some and this time I think she did not lend him any. He was here when cook and I went out."

"He was, was he? We'll have to check on that. Know where this Sims lives, Colonel?"

"He works at Lane & Company," Bumont said. "He has a couple of rooms in the old General Insurance building down on Main Street, where he can live by himself in peace and privacy."

Finch made a note.

"May I butt in, Frank?" I asked. "Sure."

"Claire, were you and Mrs. Tankin together all the afternoon?"

For the first time the girl hesitated.

"Eh—*oui, m'sieur*. Yes, yes, the whole time."

"All right," said Finch soothingly. "Maybe I'll want you again but you can go now. Send Mrs. Tankin in."

The fat cook had removed her holiday finery and changed to soft shoes and a white smock that made her look still fatter. She seemed to have a grouch on.

"Sit down, Mrs. Tankin," said Finch easily. "Tell us about yourself."

"I can stand," she retorted sullenly. "My name is Matilda Tankin. I'm fifty-seven and not ashamed of it. I've been a widow for twenty years and with the Lane family for eighteen of them. What else do you want to know?"

"Miss Rigaud has told us that you left the house about noon," said Finch, "and that Mr. Sims was here then with Miss Lane. She thinks they were arguing about money. That so?"

"They were together in the library when we left," she admitted. "I don't know what they were talking about. My ears are not as big as Claire's."

"She says the chauffeur—what's his name?"

"Charles Beele."

"That he drove you downtown and was to pick you up again, but ditched you."

"That's true enough and plenty sore it made me!"

"And the maid states that you were together all the time."

"Then she lied, the sneaky Frenchy. I don't trust none of these foreigners, frogs, wops or heinies," Matilda spat out, with an ugly look at me as if she thought I might be a Nazi in disguise.

"What?" asked Finch, seeming surprised.

"We went into Loew's about 12:45.

Anyhow, it was 2:45 when we came out. I noticed the clock in front of the box office. Charles had promised to pick us up at three."

"**W**AIT a minute. Who invited who? Did you ask Claire to go to the show with you or did she ask you to go with her?"

"She asked me. We planned it last night."

"Who paid for the seats?"

"Claire did," admitted Mrs. Tankin grudgingly.

"Go on."

"Well, we come out and Claire says to me: 'You wait here. I want to run over to Riller & Moads. I'll be back before Charles gets here.' Sure enough, she was back before Charles came because he never did show up, but it was 3:45 when she came, one solid hour! And Charles hadn't come and he never did come, so we had to get back on the bus as best we could."

"Well, well," commented Finch mildly. "We'll have to talk to that young lady again. Were your relations with Miss Lane friendly?"

"Friendly!" snorted Mrs. Tankin. "I think I was the only true friend she had in the world. She was my own lamb and I loved her better than any one else on earth, better than any one else did, even if she was sharp with me sometimes. I was the only one who wasn't always trying to work her for something. That French girl had her hand out for tips and favors all the time and Charles—" She stopped, her face dark. "Charles is a snake!"

"What d'you mean—snake?" asked Finch curiously.

Mrs. Tankin regained control of herself. "Oh, I just don't like him," she said. "He's tricky and he puts on airs. He thinks himself too good to be a chauffeur because he has a little educa-

tion and his family amounted to something once, but he isn't smart enough to get a better job. He's from run-down stock that maybe was good once, but is poor white trash now. He was all the time trying to impress Miss Lila and fooling with Claire behind her back.

"And," the fat cook continued, "her so-called friends are no better—all after her for what they could get, and not a true heart in the whole boiling."

"Suppose you tell us who you're talking about," said Finch.

"To begin with, Phillip Sims was always borrowing and begging for a little more—"

"Thought you didn't eavesdrop," I butted in. I didn't like that fat sour old hen, who seemed sore on the whole world.

"I didn't have to, Mr. who-ever-you-are," she snapped. "Anybody wasn't deaf could have heard the arguments they had! Stanley Gebson wanted to marry her for her money, and so did several others. Frances Hawkes wanted her to endow an art school. Margery Twitchell was another one always after something. The Moberly Jones were sucking up to her a lot and then, when they found Miss Lila wouldn't let Mr. Jones write her up for a big insurance policy, they got sore. Even Mrs. Renwick lived on her bounty and gave mighty little in return."

"Whew!" Finch rubbed his head gently. "Think any of these folks might have been sore enough at Miss Lane to shoot her?"

"They might have been sore enough," Matilda snapped, "but I doubt if any of them had the nerve. They're a slimy crew!"

"Colonel," Finch asked Bumont, who had sat quietly puffing his big perfecto in apparent enjoyment of Mrs. Tankin's tantrums, "will you ring for the maid again? Wait a moment, Mrs.

Tankin. I want you in on this."

CLAIRE entered nervously and shot a scared look at the cook.

"Sit down," said Finch gravely. He did not raise his voice, it was still pleasant, but it had a core of hardness.

"Miss Rigaud, you are not on the witness stand. You cannot commit perjury, for you haven't been sworn. Nevertheless, it will be much better for you to tell us the exact truth."

"*Certainement, m'sieur.* But I do not understand. *Est-ce que—*"

She paused, apprehension in her blue eyes.

"Mr. Cray asked you if you were with Mrs. Tankin all the afternoon. You said you were. Now she says you left her waiting on the corner for an hour."

"Oh, that." The blonde maid shrugged with a pale attempt at a smile. "I had forgotten. I did run over to Riller & Moads. I do not think I was gone an hour."

"You were to," Mrs. Tankin snapped.

"What were you doing?" Finch asked.

"A friend of mine had given me some hose for my birthday and they were too large for my foot"—she thrust out a slender ankle and quite unnecessarily raised her short skirt higher—"so I had to exchange them."

"Did that take an hour?" Finch questioned.

"Did *m'sieur* ever try to exchange anything in a department store?" Claire replied pertly. "No? Well, it takes time, yet not an hour, I think."

"You were gone that long," repeated Mrs. Tankin doggedly. "Wasn't I standing right under the clock?"

I butted in again: "Who gave you the stockings, Claire?"

The girl blushed. "Charles," she answered.

"You didn't by any chance, see him while you were away from Mrs. Tankin?"

There was just the least delay in her denial.

"No-o, *m'sieur, non*. I have not seen him since he let us out at the theater."

"See any one you knew in the store?"

"*Non, m'sieur.*"

"The exchange desk should have a record," I suggested.

"Yep," said Finch, and made a note. "One more question, Miss Rigaud. Mrs. Tankin says you paid for the tickets. Have you the stubs?"

"*Oui*. That is, I think so. . . . No, I threw them away."

"All right," said Finch. "It doesn't matter. Now you keep your nose clean and your stories straight. That's all for now; and for you too, Mrs. Tankin."

"One second, Frank," I said. I turned to the fat cook. "Some one mentioned a colored handyman. Was he here today?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Tankin, "Abe Jones. He looks after the yard and does odd jobs about the house. I left him eating in the kitchen. He had finished his work here for the day. I think he was going to Mrs. Anderson's to work in her garden this afternoon. She lives a few blocks down the street."

Finch pricked up his ears. "Tell me about this Jones," he ordered. "You say you left him on the premises? We'll have to check on him."

"Why," grumbled Mrs. Tankin, "there ain't much to tell. He's a decent sort of man who has worked for us for years. Sometimes he's here all day, sometimes he only works a few hours, depending on what there is to do."

Finch raised his voice. "Bunt!"

ONE of the plain clothes men appeared.

"Bunt," Finch began, "a handyman by the name of—"

"Abraham Lincoln Jones," Mrs. Tankin supplied.

"Hunt him up," Finch instructed, "and see what he knows about this. He was here around noon. Look for him at Mrs. Anderson's down the street; you can get her number from the phone book."

"Right, chief," said Bunt, and went out.

"That's all, for now, you two," Finch told the women and they left the room icily oblivious of each other's presence, just as Bill Dodson, the other plain clothes man, came in.

"Here's the bullet that killed her, Cap," he said, and handed Finch a twisted slug of lead. "It went into the baseboard at a downward angle, close to the floor. And this—he produced another—"is one that we dug out of the wall behind the dressing table."

"Good," approved Finch. He took a couple of small envelopes from his pocket, carefully labeled each, and put the bullets in them separately. "Both .38's," he mused. "You didn't see anything of a gun?"

"Not a sign. We're all through and I think the men are downstairs for the body."

"Check," said Finch. "Bunt's got your car, I suppose. You can take mine and run Wilkes and Fowler down to the station. I'll ride back with Mike."

Dobson ran downstairs and, in a moment, came pounding up again.

"There's a crowd outside, Cap, and a couple of reporters want to see you."

"We'll go down," said Finch and led the way. Bumont and I followed.

"Malloy," said Finch to the harness bull who stood at the door, "shoo all these rubber-necks outside the gate. I'll have a couple more men here in a little

while to help you. Better have one of them go to the back. . . . Who's here from the papers?"

"Me, chief," said a young fellow I recognized as Joe Elliott from the *Times*. Beside him was Treyman of the *Leader*. "What goes on here?"

"Miss Lila Lane's been shot, Joe, through the forehead with a .38. Three-four hours ago. That's all we know right now but we have a clue and I think I'll be able to give you something shortly."

"Shot? Murder or suicide? Inside or outside job? Who's the suspect? Can't we see some of the family?"

Finch dodged the barrage of questions.

"You can talk to Colonel Bumont here, if he wants to talk to you," Finch replied. "He was Miss Lane's uncle."

"Sorry I can't tell you much, boys," said the Colonel, his big red face solemn. "Lila was shot sometime between two and three o'clock by an unknown intruder and apparently died instantly. What money and jewelry she had in the house are gone. It appears to be a case of murder in the course of robbery. The police already have a suspect. That's absolutely all we know now."

"Who's the suspect, Cap? You got him here?" Elliott persisted

"No, Joe, we got a couple of yeggs booked at the station. There may be a tie-up. You see me there about eight and I'll give you anything I can."

"Well, Treyman," chortled Elliott, "this is one time I've got you stopped. Your last edition was on the street an hour ago and I've plenty of time for my story."

"This is worth an extra," retorted Treyman and made a break for his car. Elliott followed. Malloy herded the curiosity seekers out of the drive and Finch, Bumont and I stood alone on

the porch.

"Colonel," said Finch, "it looks like an open and shut case. We'll go down and work on those yeggs Cray turned in. Eh, Mike?"

"It seems almost too simple," I said. "Of course, if these bullets fit either of the guns we took off them, that'll be the end of it. If the bullets don't match the guns—"

"We'll want to see young Sims and Gebson, and Mrs. Renwick, and that Twitchell girl who was to come here and take Miss Lane to lunch," Finch broke in. "We'll want to know what that handyman, Jones, was doing this afternoon."

"Yes," I agreed, "and what has become of that chauffeur, Beele. Where'll you be tonight, Colonel?"

BEFORE Bumont could answer we heard the phone ring behind us in the hall. Bumont went in and answered.

"That was Mrs. Renwick," he explained when he returned. "She's been playing contract at Mary Karey's all the afternoon. She phoned to have Charles call for her. She was terribly shocked and said she'd take a cab out here at once. I think I'll wait here for her. You can get me at my rooms at the Jefferson tonight, Cray, if necessary."

"All right, Colonel. Malloy will stay outside and keep the crowd off until his relief comes," said Finch.

We got in my Chevy. I pulled out my plug and bit off a good chew. I'd been hungry for one for an hour but I hadn't seen any cuspidors in the Lane home.

"Looks like that pair of lugs probably pulled it, Mike," said Finch as I stepped on the starter.

"Yeah," I answered. "Only it seems a bit crude for a pair of professional

thieves to croak a girl and get picked up an hour later with their guns on them and their pockets full of hot rocks. And if they got a grand off her, why should they try to stick up a filling station that couldn't have paid off but a few bucks at the best?"

"You talk like you didn't know Hank Griffin's take, Mike," argued Finch.

"He wouldn't have much on hand at four in the afternoon," I persisted.

"The guys were probably hopped, Mike, and a coked-up snow-bird is liable to pull anything. Still, there are several angles—"

"I gotta hunch there are," I told him.

CHAPTER VI

FRANK and I went down to Reuter's and wrapped ourselves around a pair of two inch steaks with the proper trimmings. Maybe you can get as good steaks other places, but I don't know where.

We were too busy with the chow to talk much about the case and as soon as we had finished we drove to the station and went to Frank's office. He hung up his hat, rubbed his head reflectively, unbuttoned his vest, dropped into his swivel chair and lit a cigar. I bit off a chew, kicked the gaboon over toward a side chair and parked myself comfortably.

"First thing, I expect," Finch said, "we had better try to get hold of Gebson and see if he delivered that money."

"Want me to look him up?" I offered.

"I'll see what he has to say over the phone first," said Finch. On his desk phone he instructed the cop on the switchboard to ring Gebson's number. When the connection had been made, we learned that Gebson had come home to supper and gone out. His mother did not know where he had gone or when he

would return. They had seen the extra. Stanley was much disturbed, she said. Perhaps he had gone out to the Lane house.

"We'll skip it for the moment," Finch decided. "Gebson will keep."

He pushed a button and told the cop that answered to bring in the gorilla I had bopped that afternoon, who was booked as George Kovick. I'll bet that name had several more syllables where he came from.

The cop brought him in. Kovick limped and he had a lump as big as an egg on his close-cropped skull. He slipped me a dirty look and stood stolidly, his eyes down.

"Where you boys from, George?" Finch asked pleasantly.

"Chi."

"How come you so far from home?"

"Just travelin' for our health."

"Do you know, George," Finch said, still softly, "I don't believe you're going to find this climate healthy. Those rocks we got off you—did you know the girl who was wearing them this morning is dead?"

Kovick's head came up, his mouth open, his eyes popping.

"My Gawd, no, cap," he whined. "Fingy never told me—" He stopped.

"Fingy never told you what?"

"Fingy, my pardner, made a prowl this afternoon. He said he picked up the ice and he gave it to me to carry so he wouldn't have it on him if he got pinched. He never said nothin' about no killin'—the double-crossin' heel!"

"He didn't, eh?" said Finch. "Well, the dame who owned the stuff was croaked!"

"Fore Gawd, Cap, it wasn't me! Lissen: We was sittin' in a joint down on Canal Street, me and Fingy and the other two guys that was travellin' with us. A bird blows in and calls Fingy one side. Then Fingy says he is goin' to

make a prowl. He takes the Packard and is gone an hour or less. He comes back and gives me the ice. I know a bird in Baltimore can handle it, but we got no money to go there, see? Fingy says he got the rocks in a dame's bedroom, but there was no coin. We didn't even have the price of a tank of gas, so we tries a hoist. But honest to Gawd, Cap, I don't know nothin' about no dead gal. If Fingy does that's his hard luck. I wasn't with him when he copped the ice and I can prove it."

SOMEHOW it sounded like the truth. "What time was all this?" I asked.

"It must have been close to three when Fingy went off. He was back in less'n an hour," answered Kovick. "It was around four when we had the bad luck to run into you."

"That checks all right," I agreed.

"Cap," said Kovick cringingly, "could I have a little shot?"

"Not now," said Finch. "Later, maybe, if you come clean. You claim you weren't with Fingy at the Lane house today?"

"Lane house? I don't even know what you're talkin' about. Fingy never told me where he got the rocks. I didn't wanta know."

"I wonder if a little dose of rubber hose would help your memory," Finch said slowly.

"So help me Gawd, Cap, I wasn't with Fingy. Ask him. Ask the guy that runs that dump at the corner of Canal and Quincy. You got me on this stick-up thing, but I ain't due on no murder rap, not me."

Kovick cowered. An evident snow-bird, he was in bad shape. Finch regarded him coldly for a moment and pushed his bell again.

"Put him back in his cage," he told the copper who came in, "and bring in

his partner."

I turned to Finch. "I believe he's leveling, Frank."

"Sounds so to me," he agreed, "but I wouldn't take his word nor the word of that ex-con that runs that joint on Canal street."

The cop brought Fingy in. He was pale and nervous. His light flannel suit was soiled and shabby and the need of a shave didn't help his appearance.

Finch got up, looked him over contemptuously, and suddenly slapped him hard across the face.

"You murdering bum," he threatened without raising his voice but cold and deadly, "I'm going to give you the works."

Fingy staggered back. "Don't hit me, Cap," he begged. "I haven't murdered anybody."

Finch slapped him on the other side of his face.

"Straighten up!" he ordered. "I'm surprised you had the guts, but if you or your side-kick didn't croak Lila Lane, I don't know who did. He says you did it. Now, talk!"

"Cap," said Fingy, "I'll come clean. I'll talk and I'll talk straight. I never croaked anybody. It isn't in my line. I've got a nice little graft. I'm educated. I went to John Marshall High—"

"Are you a local boy?" I broke in. "Yes sir, by God, I believe you're Fingers Gentry."

"That's me," he admitted. "I came from decent people. Thank God, they're all dead now. I knew Lila Lane when we were kids at school. Tell you about it, Cap. I've a good line of patter when I'm right. I go to a house where I figure I can make a haul. If anybody's home, I'm canvassing for a mag to put myself through college. I can sling the proper lingo. If the house is empty, I go in anyhow and pick up what I can find.

"We were all in Jim's place down on

Canal Street this afternoon, lapping up a little beer. We'd had some hard luck and we were just about clean. A kid I used to know and work with some blew in, called me over, and asked me if I remembered Lila Lane. He said he had reason to believe the house would be empty this afternoon and that it would be easy to find something worth lifting. He and I drove out there together. He sat in the car while I got out and rang the bell. Nobody answered, so I tried the door. It was unlocked. I went upstairs and the first room I entered, there was Lila dead on the floor. Cap, the cold chills went all over me!"

"You weren't so chilled that you couldn't strip off her bracelet and rings," Finch accused.

"I did not. The stuff was on the dressing table. I grabbed it and took a quick look in her bag that lay there too. There was a little change in it. I took that and beat it just as fast as I could and that's the truth, so help me God!"

"WHAT time was this, Gentry?" I asked.

"It was just 3:15 by the clock on her mantel."

"Who was the fellow that tipped you off and went out there with you?" I questioned.

"A boy named Guy Tankin," he confessed. "His aunt cooks at Lane's. That's how he knew the house would be empty. He'd heard her say the night before that she and the maid were going to the movies together today because Lila would be out."

"A small time thief," Finch commented. "He's been up more than once."

"You say he didn't go in the house with you?" I asked.

"No, he waited in the car. When I told him what I had found he got out and beat it without waiting for his cut. He was scared stiff and so was I. I

drove back to the dump on Canal Street and gave George the stuff. I told him we'd better get out of town and we started for Baltimore, but we didn't have enough coin to buy gas, so we tried the heist at Griffin's."

"So that's your story, is it?" Finch sneered.

Fingy shrank back. "Don't hit me again, Cap," he pleaded. "I've told you the truth."

"Take him back," Finch instructed the copper who answered his ring. "But don't think I'm through with you, you lug," he warned Gentry.

To the copper he added: "See if Lieutenant Dedrickson is still here. If he is, tell him I want to see him."

"All right," said the officer. "Bunt is out front and wants to see you."

"Check," said Finch. "I'll see him first," and Bunt came in.

"That handyman Jones, seems in the clear, Cap," Bunt reported. "Seems he does odd jobs for other people beside the Lanes. He had been promising Mrs. Anderson, who lives a few blocks this side of Lane's on Ferry Road, that he would dig around her roses the first chance he had. He was at Mrs. Anderson's today at 1:30 sharp. She and her daughter and all their servants swear that he never left their lot until 5:30. You understand, Cap, I didn't see this Jones. I didn't bother to hunt him up after what Mrs. Anderson told me."

"I reckon that washes him out," agreed Finch. "Tell Dedrickson to come in, will you, if he's outside."

IN A moment Carl Dedrickson appeared, tall, spare, spectacled, with the air of a professor rather than of a policeman. He was a ballistic expert.

"This," Finch explained, "is the bullet that killed Lila Lane this afternoon. That one fired into her room a few days ago. The envelopes are labeled. Here

CHAPTER VII

are two .38 automatics." He drew them from a desk drawer and put them down on the blotter.

"They were taken off a couple of mobsters who were picked up this afternoon trying to stick up Hank Griffin's place. We've got both the yeggs downstairs. I want you to fire test bullets from both these guns and make microphotographs of them and of these two bullets and see if any of them match. Can you let me have them the first thing in the morning?"

"Sure," said Dedrickson enthusiastically. His eyes shone like a child's who had been given a new toy. "Let you have them late tonight if you like."

"Morning will do," returned Finch wearily. "I'm going home and to bed. Contrary to public opinion, even a cop needs to sleep sometimes. That goes for me, too."

"The prints will be on your desk in the morning by the time you get here," Dedrickson promised as he gathered up the guns and the bullets and went happily out.

"That's a bird who has found his work," Finch said.

"Somehow," I said, as Finch got to his feet and reached for his hat, "I don't think those bullets will match these guns."

"Why don't you think so, Mike?"

"Just a fool hunch, I reckon. There are several angles I want to cover. Bu-mont is paying me, you know. I'm going to try to see Sims tonight and tomorrow morning, if you like, I'll call on Gebson."

"Help yourself, Mike," Finch said. "Of course, I expect to be in on anything you get."

"Sure," I answered, "but that goes double. You get the credit and I'll take the cash. Even Steven."

So we shook hands on it and said goodnight and I went to my hotel.

I WAS living then at the St. Albans, a quiet commercial hotel downtown where I had a room and bath on the third floor. Terry Wood was waiting for me in the lobby. Wood was one of my best operatives. Of medium height, medium weight, undistinguished features and quiet dress, he came about as near being an invisible tail as any man I knew in the detective racket.

"Hello, Mike," he greeted me. "Arden gave me your message and I've been doing a little research on Phillip Sims."

"Good," I said. "What's the dope?"

"Sims is an orphan, in his early twenties, and has lived here all his life. He's a peculiar sort of bird, not exactly queer, but he seems to walk by himself. He has an unimportant sort of job, given him for family reasons, at Lane & Company. They don't think much of him down there. He is neither industrious nor punctual; for instance, he overstayed his lunch time more than an hour today."

"He did, eh?"

"It seems that is not unusual. On account of his family drag he does about as he pleases, but he isn't paid much for doing it.

"He lives by himself in a couple of rooms in the old General Insurance Building in lower Main Street, cooks his own breakfast and gets his other meals out."

"Any friends?" I asked.

"He seems to have acquaintances rather than friends," Terry answered, "mostly men of the elderly, bookish sort. Sims is a sort of arty, literary guy. He doesn't go for girls much, and I couldn't learn of any one very close to him.

"He has no money except his small salary," Terry went on, "and he is said

to spend most of that on books. He's always hard up and probably in debt. No known bad habits, but he's said to be snobbish, sarcastic, downright snotty, in fact, and nobody seems to like him much."

"I get the picture, Terry," I said. "I'm going to have a talk with him tonight if he's in. You meet me in front of his place about nine o'clock. If he isn't in, I may want him found; if he is, I think that when I go I'll leave you there to see that he stays put."

"Right, chief," said Wood. "I'll be on hand when you get there."

When I asked for my key the clerk gave me a scrawled memo: "Call 5-4731 before ten tonight." It was Arden's number and as soon as I had finished my supper I went to my room and called her.

She answered the phone herself and as soon as we exchanged hellos she began: "Poor Lila! What a shocking thing! I saw the extra. Who killed her, Mike?"

"Who do you think I am—Solomon? How would I know? John Wilkes Booth, maybe."

"I thought you'd have it all figured out by this time."

"Don't kid me. You got something, Arden?"

"A dish of dirt I'll give you if you'll run out."

"Be there in ten minutes," I promised, and I was.

ARDEN lived with her mother in a little brick bungalow on the North side. They had salvaged enough from the wreck of their fortunes to make the first payment on it, but I figured it was mortgaged to the roof.

Arden came to the door herself. She had on some sort of long white dress without any back or sleeves and she had her hair done up in the latest way and

plenty of war paint on.

"Gee!" I said admiringly, "surely all this finery isn't for a poor old dick with broken arches?"

"I wish I could say it was, Mike," she dimpled, "but I'm going to a dance. Come in and sit down."

We went into the tiny living room. Arden crossed her knees and swung a high-heeled silver sandal. If she had on any stockings they were thin enough to be invisible.

"What time do dances begin nowadays?" I inquired.

"Oh, ten or eleven or thereabouts."

"So that's why you come in late and snappish in the morning," I complained.

"You don't come in early enough yourself to know whether or not I'm late and I'm never snappish," she retorted.

"Arden," I said mournfully, "I was born twenty years too soon."

"Nonsense, Mike," she giggled. "I wouldn't have you a bit different. I like you better than any boy I know. Boys have no sense, only a line. With most of them, it's all off the same reel. You're big and tall and strong and awfully wise. I love your cute little red mustache. Really, Mike, I think you're wonderful."

Then she had to spoil it all by laughing. She had nice teeth. She smelled good, too.

"All right, Arden, now you've queered it. What's the hot stuff?"

"I saw the extra, as I told you, but there wasn't much to it. Poor Lila! I was so distressed. Tell me first what happened, Mike."

ITOLD her briefly everything I knew and she listened without comment until I had finished. Then she said:

"Well, Mike, here's my dirt. Margery Twitchell was one of Lila's closest pals. Perhaps they didn't like each

other so much but they liked to do the same things. Margery is a big horsey moll, so healthy she makes you sick. She a golf fiend, a crack tennis player, and she rides to the hounds. She does anything that gives her an excuse to wear pants and you just ought to see her in shorts and a halter!

"She rides a lot, almost every day. It seems that last week she was trotting along a bridle path somewhere out Westhampton way and her nag shied at a car parked in a wood road. In the back seat she saw Lila and that big handsome chauffer of hers in what the Victorian novels called a 'compromising position'. They looked up and saw her. Margery waved her crop and said 'excuse me' and trotted off.

"That afternoon she tried to kid Lila about it at the Country Club and Lila slapped her face. It looked for a moment, I'm told, as if there was to be a grand hair-pulling match, but Margery backed off. She could have broken Lila in half but there was something deadly about Lila when she was mad that scared the toughest.

"Margery went red and white and red again, and told Lila she'd kill her the first chance she got. What do you think of that?"

"Nothing," I said. "Threatened dames live long."

"Lila didn't," Arden insisted. "That Twitchell gal has almost as mean a temper as Lila had. I wouldn't put murder past her. She knows how to use a revolver; I've seen her shoot."

"Of course," I admitted, "a woman could have done it. Smith & Wesson made all men equal, and women too, for that matter. And, as I understand it, Miss Twitchell was to call for Miss Lane today and they were going out to the Club for lunch. They must have made up."

"Or pretended to!" Arden cried.

"Look how it fits. You say the servants were out. Why couldn't Margery have walked in and either in cold blood or in a renewed quarrel, shot Lila and walked out again?"

"She could have," I agreed. "So could Sims, who was there when the servants left. So could one of the yeggs we picked up. So could Gebson, if he was there, as I think he was. So could either the maid or the cook—they were apart an hour and either one of them could have grabbed a cab, rushed out to the house, bumped off Lila, and scuttled back downtown. Nobody knows how many more persons may have had both motive and opportunity. Beele, the chauffer, is missing. He might have done it, especially if he was mixed up with both mistress and maid, as he apparently was. I don't know whether Mrs. Renwick has an alibi or not. What do you know about her, Arden?"

"Practically nothing. She's a good-looking, carefully groomed, middle-aged dame and clever, I'm told. By the way, I think I saw her lunching with Colonel Bumont at Mite's today."

"It's a mess," I reflected gloomily. "Thanks for the info. I'll have a chat with that Twitchell gal tomorrow. See you in the morning."

The bell rang as I got up and Arden let in a personable young chap in black pants and a white monkey jacket. She introduced him to me and we all chewed the rag for a minute. Then I wished them a pleasant time at the dance and said good night. I bit off a chew, climbed in the Chevvy, stepped on the starter and rolled back across the viaduct.

CHAPTER VIII

THE General Insurance Building in lower Main Street is an old rookery that had been thrown up soon after the

Civil War when the evacuation fire had destroyed everything in the vicinity. I found Terry Wood lounging inconspicuously near the entrance.

There was no elevator so I had to climb the steep and treacherous stairs and half feel my way along the narrow dirty corridors between dark rooms occupied day times by shyster lawyers, small loan sharks and various concerns of an even less reputable type.

Sims' room, marked by a small card with his name, was at the rear of the third and top story. I knocked and in response to his invitation opened the door and entered a big high-pitched room.

Philip Lane Sims rose to meet me from a shabby Morris chair in the center of the room over which hung a naked 100-watt bulb. It was hot up there under the roof and his thin chest bare under his open pajama jacket was dappled with sweat.

He had a thin, beaked, bookish face; thin, straggly, fair hair and a thin-lipped, petulant mouth. He had a book in one hand and horn-rimmed glasses in the other. I didn't offer to shake.

"Cray is my name," I explained. "I'm a private detective. Colonel Bumont has retained me in connection with the murder of Miss Lila Lane. I—"

"Why disturb me?" Sims asked stiffly. He had a high, thin voice.

I thought I might just as well be as short as he was.

"Because you are the last person known to have seen her alive," I shot at him.

"Her murderer was that," he fired back at me.

"Sure," I agreed with him. "You've seen the extra?"

"Of course," Sims pointed to an evening paper lying on the floor. "The street was loud with it. A horrible

thing! I thought the police already had the gunman who did it in custody and I don't see what I—"

"Listen, Sims," I said a little roughly, "you are the last person known to have seen her. The yeggs that were picked up may or may not be guilty. The police have to look into every angle. I'm acting with them. You can give me civil answers to a few questions or I can call a wagon, carry you down to the station, and let you answer them there. Only, down there, they sometimes use a rubber hose if the patient doesn't talk right."

That cooled him off; he went a little pale and changed his tune.

"Oh, of course, I realize that there has to be a certain amount of investigation and red tape in connection with every crime, but it seems silly for you to pick on me. I wasn't the last person to see Lila alive today. But sit down and I'll try to tell you anything you want to know."

I TOOK the Morris chair and Sims sat on the bed. There was nothing else in the room to sit on except a rickety side chair that didn't look up to my weight. All the furniture in the big room was shabby. A couple of crazy-looking nudes hung on the walls and row upon row of books were ranked on plain wooden shelves.

I glanced at them idly. I'm no bookman.

Sims followed my look.

"I'm a collector of Virginia and of some branches of erotic literature, particularly works on fetishism and flagellation," Sims stated proudly, all of which meant nothing to me.

"By the way," he squeaked, getting more polite, "may I offer you a drink? I have no ice up here but if you can take it straight I have some fairly decent Scotch."

He hopped up, darted through a curtain hung in the middle of one side of the room which I figured masked a passage to his bath room or kitchenette and came back with a bottle of Black & White and a couple of glasses.

"No, thanks," I said. "Chewing tobacco is my weakness. But help yourself if you like." I saw he was nervous.

"I believe I will have one," Sims said and poured out and swallowed a good three fingers.

The slug of Scotch seemed to make him feel better. Color came into his thin face and he relaxed on the bed.

"All right," he squeaked and lit a cigarette. "What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about your call at the Lane home today."

"My lunch hour is from twelve to one. I drove out there today on a matter of business. The maid let me in but after talking with Lila I let myself out. I was there no more than fifteen minutes and I left Lila in her usual good health and spirits."

"With all her clothes on?"

"What in hell do you mean?" Sims snorted. "Of course."

"She didn't have much on when we found her," I explained. "Mind telling me what your business with her was?"

"I don't see that it's any of yours, but I will. I just learned of a man who has a set of Burk's history for sale, the four volumes complete, as well as a Beverly and a Stith." His pale blue eyes sparkled as he recited the names, which I hope I have right. "I could get them for a measly three hundred. The books are worth twice that. I wanted Lila to lend me the money. That amount meant nothing to her and the books would have filled holes in my collection."

I wondered if that was where the missing cash had gone.

"Did she let you have it?"

"She did not," Sims claimed disgustedly. "Lila would spend twice that on a party but when I asked her for a loan to help me build up a collection that would be permanent and valuable, she balked like the mule she was."

The whisky had oiled his tongue.

"She's dead, you know," I reminded him.

"I can't help it if she is," Sims said. "It's a wonder that she wasn't shot sooner. Lila was vain, hard and stubborn. She cared for no one but herself, for nothing save her own pleasure. She's no loss to the world, I can tell you."

FOLKS are always telling me that I'm hard-boiled, but this callous young sprig made me sore.

"You'll soon have the money to buy all the books you want, I reckon," I said, trying to be sarcastic. "Miss Lane left no will and you will benefit considerably. One of the reasons we are interested in your doings today is that you're one of the heirs. Only, if you *did* bump her off, you wouldn't inherit, you know."

He was off the bed, shaking a thin fist at me, his pale eyes blazing.

"How dare you insinuate—"

Without rising, I put out a hand and shoved him back on the bed so hard he bounced.

"Keep still and speak soft, you sap," I told him, "or I'll do more than push you. Now give me the facts and give 'em to me straight. Did you quarrel with your cousin today?"

"I did not," Sims said sullenly. "I asked her to lend me the money. She wouldn't, so I got up and left. We had no words to speak of. I did tell her what I thought of her stinginess and she just laughed at me."

"Were you in the habit of borrowing

from her?"

"I have once or twice. What are rich relations for?"

"How much have you had from her?"

"None of your business."

"How much salary do you draw?" I persisted. "Are you in debt?"

"That's not your business either," Sims squeaked.

"You say you spent only fifteen minutes at your cousin's. How come you were an hour late getting back to work from lunch today?"

The boy was frightened. He reached for the bottle of Scotch and took another hooker and lighted another cigarette before he answered.

"You've been snooping into my affairs, haven't you?" he sneered.

"Snooping's what I'm paid for," I informed him. "Answer my question. How come you were so late getting back to work this noon?"

"I wasn't so late," muttered Sims. "It's a long drive out there and back. My old Ford isn't so hot. And I had to get something to eat, didn't I? You know how long it takes to get any service."

"You said you weren't the last person to see her alive today. How do you know. What did you mean by that?"

"I'd have told you before if you had given me a chance," Sims whined. "You know there are entrance gates at each end of the curving drive that goes up to the Lane house. Just as I was driving out at one end, I saw Stanley Gebson tooling his big Buick into the other. He must have seen her after I did."

"Did he see you?"

"I don't know whether he did or not. I saw him. Ask him."

"SIMS," I said, getting up, "you're a thoroughly unpleasant young pup. I don't know whether you plugged your cousin or not, but if you did, it

will give me pleasure to see you go to the chair. I don't know but it would if you didn't. No use getting het up," I warned him as he slid his feet to the floor, "you just have to take it for I can handle you with two fingers."

"You're a big bully," he squealed.

"So what?" I sneered. "Just one more question. Do you own a gun?"

"Yes, and a permit. I'm all alone here at night."

"All right about the permit. Lessee the gun."

Sims got off the bed and opened the top drawer of a heavy old walnut bureau, rummaged a bit. He searched more closely through the top drawer and then through each of the others.

At last he turned around.

"It's gone," he squealed. "If it was an act, I thought, it was good. He was white."

"Since when?" I asked coldly.

"I don't know. I haven't had it out lately."

"What was it?"

"A .38 Colt automatic," Sims said.

"That's the caliber of the gun she was killed with," I told him. "If I were you, I'd try to find that gun. That's all for tonight, but take my advice and don't try to leave town."

I left him gaping and made my way down the three dreary flights of stairs. Propped against the entrance Terry Wood was awaiting orders.

"Terry," I instructed him, "I want you to tail this bird. If he stays in all night, well and good. If he doesn't, I want to know where he goes and what he does. If he stays in and goes to work in the morning you can go home and get some sleep. I'll have another of the boys take it from there."

"Right, Chief," said Wood.

I went to my room and called Sam Durfee and told him to take over Sims in the morning from Wood and went to

bed. Nothing happened to disturb my dreams.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN I got to my office on Friday morning Arden was already there, as fresh and frisky as a fox-terrier pup. She had on a short dark-blue skirt that exposed her legs to advantage and a pale blue sweater that showed why the Hays office made the movie gals stop wearing them on the screen.

"Hi, Mike," she grinned. "You see I made it before you did, even if the dance did last pretty late."

"If you didn't have on a different outfit, I'd suspect you had been out all night," I told her sourly. "Any mail?"

"On your desk. Terry Wood phoned that Phil Sims stayed in his rooms until eight this morning, that he tailed him down to Lane & Company's offices and turned him over to Sam Durfee. And that he, Terry, was going to bed."

"Get Finch for me, will you?" I asked her and while she dialed I glanced through my mail which proved of no importance.

"Captain Finch is on the phone," Arden said and handed me the receiver.

"Hey, Frank: Mike Cray. What about the bullets?"

"Neither one was fired from either Kovick's or Gentry's rod. And they were not fired from the same weapon."

"Positive?"

"Dedrickson is," affirmed Finch, "and I'd stake a good deal on his opinions. You can see the photographs of the bullets any time. As for the guns, Gentry's had a full clip in it and showed no signs of having been fired or cleaned. Kovick's gat had been fired once, but I believe you said it went off when you sapped him in Griffin's place."

"Correct," I said. "Has that chauffeur—Beele—turned up?"

"Neither hide nor hair of him."

"Dr. Robards make his post-mortem?"

"Yep," Finch answered. "Leaving out his report about the wound, the girl's stomach was empty. Evidently she had eaten nothing since breakfast, so we can't fix the time of her death any better than we could yesterday, sometime between two and three. You turned up anything?"

I told him briefly about my chat with Sims and that I had a tail on him but that the city could take over if Finch wanted to.

"No," said Finch. "I won't interfere with your graft. Let Bumont foot the bill. I got plenty of use for the few 'tecs a stingy city allows me. What are you going to do next?"

"I'm going to call Bumont directly. Then I thought I'd step over to the Third National and buzz Gebson. After that I plan to give the Twitchell gal the once over. Then I might run out to the Lane house and have a talk with Mrs. Renwick. I'll keep you posted."

"Check," Finch said.

I hung up and told Arden to ring Colonel Bumont's office, which she did, but his secretary said he hadn't come down yet.

"You're in charge," I told Arden, "while I go and chew the rag with Mr. Gebson, the maiden's prayer."

"Give Stanley my love if he asks after me," chirped Arden pertly. "You know we used to ride on the same scooter."

"Pick up any garbage at the dance last night?" I asked.

"Oh boy! Plenty that would shock the grown-ups but nothing helpful toward solving the Lane case. Wait: I did hear that Colonel Bumont had been making passes at Mrs. Renwick lately. If I hadn't seen them together at lunch yesterday I wouldn't believe it. He likes them greener."

"Maybe he's growing up," I said; "and speaking of lunch reminds me. When you go out this noon drop in at the exchange desk at Riller & Moads and see if they have a record of the exchange of a pair of stockings by Miss Rigaud yesterday afternoon."

"That will be perfectly super," cried Arden. "Nothing pleased her like being given a little job of sleuthing to do."

CHAPTER X

STANLEY SPOTTISWOODE GEBSON, tall and tanned, sat erect at his glass-topped desk in the Third National. From his custom-made brogues to his thick wavy hair he was all that a well-dressed, well-groomed man-about-town should be. He fingered my card as if it might soil his hands and raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Colonel Bumont," I explained, as I shifted my cud and looked around to locate a cuspidor, "has asked me to look into the death of Miss Lila Lane."

"I should think that the business of the regular police," said Gebson coldly.

"It is, of course; and by the way, Captain Finch tried to locate you last night and couldn't. But the cops got plenty to do, such as keeping the jaywalkers from crossing Broad Street against the lights and seeing that nobody parks his heap too long in one place. That cuts down the time they can give to crime. Colonel Bumont is paying me to handle the case in connection with the force and he wants action."

"I see," said Gebson, "but why should you call on me?"

"In the first place, Miss Lane was a friend of yours. Somebody croaked her. There was a reason. If we find out all we can about her affairs from everyone who knew her well, we may get a lead."

"Of course," asserted Gebson, "I'm

ready to help in any way I can but I am sure I know nothing that would aid you."

"We have to go through the motions just the same," I said.

"I suppose so," Gebson agreed, fiddling with a paper knife.

"Second place," I went on, "her maid says that Miss Lane talked with you over the phone yesterday morning and that she asked you to bring her out a thousand bucks."

"That is correct," Gebson admitted. "I did take her a thousand in new twenty dollar bills, for which she gave me her check."

"What time were you out there yesterday? This is just routine, you know," I added, as he seemed to hesitate.

"About one o'clock."

"Do you usually leave your desk to carry cash to girls?"

Gebson flushed, but answered quietly: "We'd had a little dust-up at the Club the night before. Oh, nothing serious, but we had exchanged some angry words that neither of us meant. Yesterday morning I called her up to smooth over matters and she suggested that I run out for a moment at lunch time and bring her some money."

"Did you continue the battle?"

Gebson didn't like it, but he was patient.

"Not at all," he averred. "Lila was very sweet and reasonable. We agreed to forget and forgive. I stayed only a few moments. She said that Miss Twitchell was coming to take her to lunch and I had to get back to the bank."

"Did you see Phillip Sims drive out as you were driving in?"

"A car was going out, I think. I don't know who was driving it."

"Were you and Miss Lane engaged?"

Gebson squirmed in his swivel chair. He wasn't used to being catechized and it was apparent that he didn't like it,

but he controlled his temper.

"No-o, not exactly," he answered slowly. "We had an understanding."

"Know any reason anyone would want to bump her off?"

GEBSON shook his handsome head. "I do not know of anyone who would have had a reason to do so," he said carefully. "Miss Lane was a grand person. She was high strung, of course; she had been spoiled. Who, in her position, would not have been? She liked her own way, she had a temper, but fundamentally she was fine."

"I've heard different," I baited him.

Gebson gave me an icy stare.

"From whom, for instance?" he asked coldly. "That louse Sims, perhaps? He's been begging from her for years. From some of her jealous girl friends?"

I shrugged off his questions.

"How wealthy was Miss Lane?" I questioned in return.

"Miss Lane was the sole heir to a considerable estate. Just how large no one knows, unless it is Colonel Bumont," said Gebson cautiously. "I have heard that her properties have depreciated somewhat during the last few years. I do not think Colonel Bumont a particularly efficient administrator."

"Why not?"

"Oh, just from the things I hear," said Gebson vaguely. He waved his hand indicating the various desks with which his own was ranked. "A lot of information comes to a banker," he explained. "The Colonel is considered a very able lawyer, but as a financier I am inclined to think him—well, not entirely conservative. He likes to take a chance."

"Did Miss Lane keep a considerable deposit here?"

"Only a checking account. Her allowance, which I believe Colonel Bumont controlled, was deposited every month

and she kept that pretty well covered by her checks."

"How much was the monthly allowance?"

"That, Mr. Cray, is something that I do not think it proper for me to tell you," Gebson said firmly. "I feel that I have told you all that I can and I am going to ask you to excuse me. I understood that the police had arrested some gunmen who were supposed to have done the killing and in that case I cannot understand the necessity of this inquisition."

"The cops haven't pinned it on the mobsters yet," I said. "So far as we know now, you were the last person who saw her alive. You left her alive and in good health, didn't you?"

That nettled him out of his studied calm. He sprang to his feet.

"What are you insinuating, Cray?" he demanded angrily, loud enough to cause some heads at the other desks to turn our way. "The papers stated that she talked to her uncle over the phone an hour after I left her! A dozen people can tell you that I was back in the bank from one-fifteen until after four o'clock! I loved Miss Lane; I had expected to make her my wife and I do not think any further conversation is in order."

"Hold your horses, big boy," I drawled. I was not impressed. I did not think he had killed the girl but if he knew anything helpful I wanted to devil it out of him.

I said: "A gunman could have done it, but the police and I have reasons for thinking that it could have been otherwise. Nobody's trying to pin anything on you, so don't get so hot. You want the man who did it caught, don't you?"

"Of course," said Gebson, still stiffly, but more calmly, "but you need not insult me. Have you looked up that chauffeur, Beele? The papers said he was missing. I disliked him extremely

and I thought that he was impertinent toward Miss Lane, but she always defended him. She felt sorry that with his background and education he was unable to find any work worth while."

"We haven't found him yet, but we will," I said. "His absence does look bad. Any other suggestions?"

"No-o," replied Gebson slowly. "You're checking on Sims, of course, and on—"

"On Sims, yes," I admitted. "And on who else?"

"Oh, nobody," Gebson returned. "I really have no other ideas and no more time to give you. I positively must ask you to excuse me now."

He glared and I spit deliberately into his shiny spitoon and left.

CHAPTER XI

FROM the Third National I rolled out Franklin past Monroe Park and into sleepy Park avenue which, from the way it winds about, must have originally been a cow path.

The Twitchells lived in an old-fashioned, rather shabby frame house set well back from the street. A giant wisteria vine draped the front porch. A colored maid answered the bell and shunted me around the house where, she said, Miss Margery was taking her morning exercise in the back yard.

I found Miss Twitchell clad in very short white shorts and a halter batting a tennis ball up against the back of the house.

She was tall and husky, with a mop of blonde hair tied up in a green bandana. She made me think of a hot horse.

I told her who I was and that I represented Colonel Bumont who had retained me to investigate the Lane murder.

"Come and sit down," she invited and led me to a hard iron bench in the shade

of a mimosa. She wiped her big brown arms that were dappled with sweat and waggled the halter back and forth to fan her perspiring breasts. Her tanned thighs, spread out on the bench, were as thick as mine and I'm a heavy man.

"I have to take a good stiff work-out every day," she explained, "or I'd waddle like a duck when I walk. What can I do for you?"

I went straight to the point. "Did you see Lila Lane yesterday?"

"No," denied Miss Twitchell, "I did not. We had an engagement to lunch at the Club. I was to drive by and pick her up around one o'clock, but a little earlier Mrs. Renwick phoned and said that Lila had asked her to tell me that she had to break our engagement because of a business conference she was obliged to attend. I didn't give a damn. Lila was a bitch and I was still sore at her although I was willing to call matters quits if she was. I had asked her to lunch with the idea of making up our row. I suppose you're here because you heard about that?"

I admitted that some rumors of a fuss had reached me.

"I don't want to talk too much about the dead," said Miss Twitchell virtuously, "but I suppose I must clear myself. By sheer chance, while I was riding last week, I happened to catch Lila and that handsome brute she had for a chauffeur doing some very heavy necking. I was foolish enough to try to kid Lila about it later and we nearly had a fight."

"Did you tell her you were going to kill her?" I asked.

"I expect I did," replied Miss Twitchell meekly. "We all pop off and say things like that sometimes, you know."

"Sure," I agreed, "and if nothing happens, it's forgotten. The trouble is that some one did kill Miss Lane yesterday."

"Well, I didn't," asserted the big

blonde. "I thought the papers said a gunman did it."

"Maybe," I told her, "and maybe not. What did you do yesterday afternoon after Mrs. Renwick phoned?"

"I didn't do anything," Miss Twitchell stated. "The family are all away at camp and our maid was out. I fixed myself some lunch and took a nap. I was alone in the house until late in the evening, when I dressed and went out to the Club for a swim."

"Nary alibi at all then?"

"Nary one," she confessed frankly. "I could, I suppose, have gone out to Lila's and shot her and got away without being seen. Only I didn't. So while I can't prove I didn't, I'm sure you can't prove I did."

"That seems logical," I admitted. "Granting that you didn't, do you know any one who might have had a reason to kill Miss Lane?"

"Oh, I know plenty of people who may have wanted to kill her at one time or another, just as I did for a moment last week. But I'm like this: I get mad quickly and flame up and it's all over. I'm not like Stanley Gebson, for instance."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, he's the self-contained type that can take a lot up to a certain point. Then he blows up and he stays ugly for a long time."

I THOUGHT of how icy-smooth Gebson had been with me up to the moment he exploded and I was inclined to agree with Miss Twitchell.

"Why," I said, "do you mention Gebson? Do you think he could have killed her?"

"I think he would have been capable of it, but I very much doubt that he would ruin his prospects by such an act, particularly as he was supposed to be after Lila's money. I simply mentioned

him to illustrate my point about the way anger acts on different people and because you asked me if I knew of any one who had reason to hate her. I'd hate anyone who treated me the way she treated him, making him fetch and carry while she carried on with her chauffeur behind his back."

"Think Gebson knew about that?" I probed.

"It has been common knowledge," she said moodily.

"Mrs. Renwick had no reason to love Lila," she went on. "Lila supported her, it is true, but made her eat dirt to pay for it. Lila treated her more contemptuously than she did her servants."

"So? What do you know about Philip Sims?" I said.

"Nothing much," Miss Twitchell replied indifferently. "He's a slimy little pip-squeak that I'd like to take across my lap and paddle."

I had to laugh at the picture. She looked entirely capable.

"That," I said, "I should like to see," and Miss Twitchell laughed also and rose.

"Anything else I can tell you?" she asked.

"Unless you know something else pertinent, no," I said.

"I don't," she said, so I thanked her and left.

CHAPTER XII

IT WAS getting past lunch time. I went back to the office and found that Arden had already eaten hers and returned.

"Turn up anything at Riller & Moads?" I asked her.

She was evidently disappointed with her little effort at detection.

"No," she said glumly, "I couldn't find out anything at the exchange desk. But you know, Mike, if a girl wanted to

turn in a pair of stockings for another pair of the same kind and price, she wouldn't need to go to the exchange desk. She could do it at the stocking counter. I tried the girls there and described the maid as well as I could but no one remembered having seen her."

"It doesn't matter, Arden," I consoled her. "I know you did all you could and I'm just as much obliged. See if you can get Finch, will you?"

It turned out that he was in.

"Frank," I said over the phone, "if you haven't had lunch yet, let's eat together and I'll give you the dope on my morning's work."

"Check," he agreed. "Meet you around at Luigi's."

I got there first and ordered a dozen raw clams and a mixture of hot crab and shrimp for myself and the same for Finch, of which he approved when I told him.

I went over my chats with Gebson and the Twitchell upon which he made no comments. I could see from his twinkling eyes that he had some news of his own.

"All right, Frank," I said when I had finished my recital, "I can see you got something. Spill it."

"We got Beele," said Finch contentedly, "only we ain't, exactly."

"You ain't exactly," I mimicked him. "What do you mean by the double talk?"

"Beele was picked up last night by the state police a few miles south of Charlottsburg on No. 1, with a cracked head. Apparently a front tire blew and he piled the Lane sedan up against a telephone pole. The state police turned him over to the Charlottsburg cops and he is in the hospital there under guard. They weren't able to indentify him until this morning."

"Can he talk?"

"Not yet, and they don't know how

soon he can, although they say there is no serious concussion."

"Anything on him?" I ruminated.

"Nine hundred and eighty bucks in new twenties and a .38 automatic!" Finch crowed. "Looks like that tears it. I'm afraid you've wasted your morning, Mike."

"Could be," I agreed. "How the guns do crop up in this case! Looks like somebody around here deals in .38's wholesale."

"Beele certainly looks to me like our man," Finch went on. He wiped his mouth and leaned back in his chair. "He had plenty of time to go back to the house after he dropped the women at the theater, shoot Miss Lane, grab the cash and beat it, and apparently that is what he did."

"But why?" I wanted to know.

FINCH stared at me. "Why? You've learned that Lila and Beele were doing some heavy necking. He was a good-looking brute, they all say, and it seems that little Lila wasn't choosy. Perhaps Beele got tired of her. Or perhaps he wanted more than some loving. It's said he came from a good family. Maybe he wanted to marry Lila and her money. If she laughed at his pretensions he might have killed her in a passionate rage and then, realizing what he had done, grabbed the cash and beat it."

"You're inventing a regular romance," I kidded him.

"It has happened plenty of times," Finch persisted. "It's plausible. So far as we know, Beele has no alibi. He had the opportunity and I've just suggested a motive. All the rest of the persons most concerned seem placed between two and five. Gebson was at the bank. Sims was at his office. Mrs. Renwick was playing cards. The Colonel was in court. We know the gunmen

didn't do the shooting with the guns you took off them."

"My dad always taught me to look for the bird with the best alibi," I remarked.

Finch merely smiled.

"The only persons so far connected with the case who don't have alibis are Miss Twitchell and the two women servants and I can't see any of the three as a killer," Finch declared.

"Not much motive for either the maid or the cook," I admitted, "although the maid may have been jealous if Beele was two-timing here with Miss Lane, as it seems he was. As for the Twitchell gal, while I wouldn't trust her far, I'd be more suspicious if she appeared to have a water-tight alibi."

"I don't suppose it's any use to send any one to Charlottsburg until Beele is in shape to talk and to be moved," Finch reflected. "The police there have agreed to keep me posted as to his condition. What are you going to do this afternoon?"

"I'm going out to the Lane house," I said. "I want to chat with Mrs. Renwick. Then I suppose I'd better report to Bumont if I expect to get paid. By the way, did the finger prints tell anything?"

"Not a thing," said Finch.

"I didn't think they would. See you later in the day," I promised.

CHAPTER XIII

THE Chevy rolled me out Ferry road to the Lane home. I dumped my quid and rang. The French girl, her eyes red and her face puffy, answered the bell.

"Mrs. Renwick at home?" I asked as I sort of shouldered my way in past the maid. "I'm Mike Cray, on the case, you know," I went on as the girl hesitated.

"Oh, yes, *m'sieur*. I'll see. Will you sit down?" She gestured toward one of the high-backed, hard-seated chairs against the wall and tripped up the stairs, giving me a pleasing eyeful of attractive gams.

She was back in a moment.

"Mrs. Renwick is lying down but she says if you please to wait she will descend directly."

"That suits me exactly, Claire. I believe that's your name? Because I want to talk to you too."

She made her eyes big. "*Qui, m'sieur, certainement*, but yesterday I told *le capitaine* all I knew."

"*Peut-etre*," I came back at her. I got so I could parley-vous a little in the first war, but I've forgotten most of it now. I stood up and sort of shepherded her into the chromium and glass library.

"Sit down, Claire," I told her and poked my jaw out and looked as tough as I could which is tolerable tough. We sat. She crossed her pretty legs in their thin stockings and began to plait her apron. She'd have gone good on the witness stand, that mademoiselle; the jury would have strained their eyes and forgot they had ears.

"Where did you meet Charles yesterday?" I growled at her.

"Why, I told you, he took us to the theater and never came back," she began.

"Cut out the stall," I told her roughly and took a shot in the dark. "You saw him during the hour you left Mrs. Tank-in waiting. Come clean. I want to know where you went with him."

"How do you know?"

My shot had scored. "That cuts no ice," I grated. "You were seen together. Now come across."

She picked up her dainty apron and covered her face and began to cry.

I got up and patted her on the shoulder.

"Now, Claire," I told her with a change of pace. "you're a nice girl, I can see, but you're in bad. I want to help you if I can. Do you know where Charles is now?"

She shook her head.

"He's in a hospital at Charlottsburg," I informed her, "with a busted conk. He smashed the car and himself too. When he was picked up he had on him a gun of the type Miss Lane was killed with and a bunch of new twenty-dollar bills like those Mr. Gebson brought her yesterday. Charles wasn't hurt so bad he couldn't talk to the cop who is still guarding him, and he says you are to blame for the whole thing."

THAT fetched her. Sometimes you have to anticipate the truth a little in this racket. The apron came down, the tears stopped, her voice rose.

"*Le sale cochon!* I'll tell you the whole thing. Charles has made love to me ever since he came. I knew he was a no-good, but he could be so sweet!" Her big eyes rolled. "He promised me that when he make his fortune we should be married and go to Quebec to live.

"Then I learn he was making love to Miss Lila too. He wrote her notes and verses and she used to laugh over them and say Charles was *un poète manqué* but as lover he was all there!

"Finally," Claire went on bitterly, "he became completely *fou*. He thought Miss Lila would marry him and when he asked her she laughed in his face. So he thinks he will make his fortune and get even with her at the same time. He tells me that he really loves me, only me, all the time and that he has just played up to Miss Lila for what he could get out of it. From her I knew better but I loved him so I could not help but hope what he said would become the truth.

"So he plans to scare Miss Lila by threatening the kidnap. He writes those

notes, he forces her car off the road one night and he shoots that bullet into her mirror but she don't scare."

"I thought the kidnapping scheme had an amateur twist," I said contemptuously. "So Charles dreamed that up, eh? But what happened yesterday?"

"He found he couldn't frighten any money out of Miss Lila and he got reckless," Claire explained. "He learned Wednesday that she was going to the club yesterday with Miss Twitchell. He told me to ask Mrs. Tankin to go to the movies with me. Then he made me ditch her for a while and come back with him to the house."

"What did he want you in on that for?"

"So I could open the safe. He thought it would be full of jewelry. He said he knew a man who would turn it into cash for him and that we would take the car and drive to New York and get married and take a ship to Canada."

"And you fell for that?" I sneered. "And I suppose you told him about the cash Mr. Gebson was supposed to bring out?"

"I did not," Claire denied. "I told him all Miss Lila's good pieces were at the bank but he didn't believe me. So I thought I would pretend to fall in with his plans and let him see for himself. As soon as I left Mrs. Tankin I met Charles around the corner and we drove out here."

"What time was that?" I asked.

"We arrived here just after three. We went upstairs and *mon Dieu!* There she lay on the floor with that hole in her head! I was scared out of my wits and Charles was scared too.

"I wouldn't open the safe. I told him of a surety we must run and run quick. But first Charles went through her bag and found the bills. He forgot all about the jewelry which was in plain sight on her dressing table."

"WAIT a moment. Did you leave the door unlocked?"

"I don't know. We may have in our hurry to get out.

"Then he drove me back downtown. He said I must keep my lip buttoned and know nothing, that I must go back with Mrs. Tankin and that he would be along after a while. He said he had some business he must attend to first, and so he ran out on me, the dirty pig, and now he blames it all on me!"

"You better come clean, Claire," I warned her. "That's a very pretty story but I want the plain truth. Who shot her, Charles or you?"

She screamed, shot out of her chair and plumped down in front of me with her arms around my knees. "Monsieur Cray," she sobbed, "you must believe! *C'est la pure verité!*"

And then Mrs. Renwick, an amused smile curling her full red lips, came into the room. She was a handsome, plump brunette, fortyish, and she looked as cool and composed as if she had never heard of a murder. She wore lounging pajamas of heavy white satin and her feet were bare in white kid mules.

"A touching scene!" she commented dryly. "Was it me or Claire you wanted to see?"

She seemed to know who I was.

"Both of you," I told her grimly, "but I'm through with this skirt for now. Beat it, Claire," I told the maid, "but stay on the lot and keep your trap shut. Captain Finch will want your story taken down and signed, and if you haven't told the truth, God help you."

"Oh, *m'sieur*, I have, I have," she moaned and with her apron to her eyes again, she got up and scrambled.

Mrs. Renwick sat down calmly, reached for a box of cigarettes, offered it to me and when I shook my head, selected one for herself. She had class, that dame. She looked me up and

down, a flicker of contempt in her eyes.

"What is all this about?" she wanted to know. "What has Claire been telling you?"

"Plenty," I told her shortly, "but today I'm asking the questions. Where were you from noon until five yesterday, Mrs. Renwick?"

Her eyebrows lifted but she took it in her stride.

"Luncheon, and auction afterward, at Mrs. Karey's on Park Avenue."

For the time I passed her statement as made.

"By the way," I inquired, "what is Mrs. Karey's telephone number?"

Mrs. Renwick's carefully shaped brows went up again and she took a long draw on her cigarette and then answered serenely:

"9-7169, I think. You can find it in the book. You can verify my presence there all yesterday afternoon if you think it necessary."

Her voice seemed faintly familiar but if I had met her before I could remember neither time nor place.

"Just routine, Mrs. Renwick," I said. "We have to ask these questions and we have to check the answers. Now, you got any ideas about this business?"

SHE crossed her slender feet, her back stiff against her chair. I expect she was brought up by a generation of ladies who were taught not to cross their knees and not to lounge in their seats.

"Why," she answered easily, "I think we've all taken it for granted that it was a case of robbery and murder by a burglar. I assumed from what Colonel Bumont told me that the police had the man."

"They've got a couple of mobsmen," I agreed, "but whether it can be pinned on them I wouldn't know yet. There are other angles."

"For instance?" she wanted to know.

"You're asking questions again," I told her bluntly. "I'm asking them to-day."

"You do not need to be rude, Mr. Gray—is that your name?"

"Cray," I corrected her. "Being rude is my racket—sometimes. Who stands to profit by Miss Lane's death? Who hated her enough to kill her? Those are the things I want to know."

"Why, as to your first question," she said slowly, "I hardly know. I believe Lila left no will. I suppose I shall come in for something and so will Phil Sims and possibly Colonel Bumont. We are the only close relatives. There are some distant cousins. I really don't know the value of the estate nor how the law will divide it."

For the first time she showed some emotion, as she went on:

"I am not interested in the estate. I have enough money of my own to live on. I only know Lila is gone. We sometimes had our differences, but I loved her dearly."

Mrs. Renwick touched her eyes with a wisp of lace but I did not see any actual tears. I wondered if she thought I'd swallow her statement, but I didn't bat an eye.

"And my second question," I pressed her. "Who hated her enough to kill her, granting the gangsters didn't?"

"I do not know of any one, I cannot think of any one," Mrs. Renwick began vaguely. "Lila had an unfortunate manner at times. She was not always kind to me and to others I have known her to be, well, downright disagreeable; I suppose I might say mean.

"She helped Phillip Sims financially, but she let him see that she despised him. With Stanley Gebson, who wanted to marry her, she was off and on, irritating him almost to point of distraction. She was always having spats with the

Colonel, because he controlled her income and would not let her carry out all her whims. She was often caustic with Claire and with Mrs. Tankin. Lila and Margery Twitchell were at daggers' points."

"What were her relations with Charles Beele?" I asked.

Mrs. Renwick hesitated.

"He was rather too familiar for a servant," she permitted herself to say. "Lila was somewhat to blame. She spoiled and tortured Charles by turns. His absence seems strange. Have the police been able to locate him yet?"

"Yes," I said, but I did not explain further than to say that his actions and movements the previous day were being checked.

"Miss Lane must have been a tough dame to live with," I observed. "Ever thought of leaving her?"

"What on earth put such an idea into your head?" said Mrs. Renwick, her tone sharp.

"Oh, a little bird. How do you and the Colonel get along?"

That seemed to fluster her just a trifle. She took another long draw and stubbed out her cigarette before she answered.

"What a curious question! And what has that to do with your investigation of Lila's death? Colonel Bumont and I are excellent friends, that is all. He is one of the finest, most chivalrous gentlemen I know!"

"Lady, he should be proud of your recommendation," I answered and I put on my hat and left. I was so hungry for a chew I couldn't stand it any longer and they had no cuspidors in that fancy joint. Anyhow, I was through with Mrs. Renwick for the moment.

I had to hand it to her as a carefully-trained, beautifully-polished piece of finished goods; but she had told me at least three plain, downright lies.

CHAPTER XIV

IT WAS rather late on Friday afternoon when I got back to the office and found Arden in a dither.

"Wherever have you been?" she stormed.

"My God," I rasped, "you dames and your questions! I been busy. What's the matter?"

"There's mail," she snapped, "that needs answering. Captain Finch wants you and Colonel Bumont wants you. Which of them shall I ring first?"

"Neither," I told her. "I'll run around and see Bumont now and Finch can wait. Take care of the mail as best you can; that's part of what you draw down your munificent salary for. I won't be back this afternoon. Go home when you get through and if anything I ought to know happens before you leave, give me a ring at the hotel tonight."

"All right," said Arden plaintively, "but aren't you going to tell me what you discovered this afternoon or give me some more detecting to do?"

"Tomorrow, kid," I promised, and was on my way.

The gilt letters on the outside door read: "Bumont, Blenkinson & Bishop, Attorneys and Counselors-at-Law." Around town they were known as the three bulls, but Bumont was the real bull-of-the-woods.

In his private office the Colonel sat behind his wide mahogany desk. He was broad as a door, jowled like a bull, and red as a beaker of Burgundy. The Colonel did not look well. The whites of his fierce eyes were yellow and his hands had gained no steadiness.

"Well, Cray," he growled. "Made any progress?"

"A bit here and there, Colonel." I pulled out my plug. At least he catered to the old fashioned trade enough to keep a spittoon by the side of his desk.

"The gunmen appear to have an out," I reported. "Neither the bullet that killed your niece nor the one Dobson dug out the wall of her room was fired from either of the rods we took off the yeggs. They weren't shot from the same gun, either."

"Hump!" snorted the Colonel. "I don't take too much stock in this baloney about ballistics. Many's the time I've seen an expert balled up in court by a clever lawyer and I never saw a jury yet that was much impressed by microphotographs. The guns could have been switched."

"Possibly," I admitted, "but I expect we'll find the right one yet. You heard about Beele?"

"Yes," grunted the Colonel. "I saw in the noon edition that he had been caught at Charlottsburg with a bunch of money and a .38 automatic on him. Can he talk yet?"

"I don't know," I answered. "I saw Finch at lunch time and Beele was still in a coma so far as he knew. The Charlottsburg cops will keep in touch with him. As for Beele, that French gal spilled quite a lot to me today and if her story stands up, while Beele tried to scare some money out of Miss Lane, he didn't kill her."

"He wrote the kidnap notes, eh?" asked the Colonel.

"So the gal says. She admits she met him downtown yesterday and drove back to the house to open the safe for him but she insists that when they got there, Miss Lane was dead. Beele got the money all right and Gentry came along behind him and got the rocks."

"Who's Gentry?"

"One of the yeggs we pinched," I said, and told the Colonel about the going-over we had given the two gangsters the night before.

"Must have been a regular procession out to the Lane house yesterday,"

I went on. Sims, Gebson, Claire and the chauffeur, Gentry and the Tankin boy, and perhaps somebody else."

THE Colonel glared at me beneath his busy brows.

"Somebody else?" he roared. "Seems to me you named suspects enough. If the gangsters didn't do it, as you claim the bullets prove—not that I accept your proof as yet, mind you—the evidence points straight toward Beele. I never trusted the fresh young pup. I can't see Gebson in it, but if neither Beele nor the gangsters are guilty, what about Sims? I know he owns a pistol. I've seen it. He hated Lila as only a man can hate a person who has helped him."

"Sims says he saw Gebson going in. Gebson admits he saw Miss Lane after Sims had left her."

"Sims could have sneaked back in, couldn't he?" growled Bumont.

"That possibility has occurred to me," I admitted, "but if he had done so, wouldn't he have taken the money? Money is what he went out there for."

"He admits that, does he?" said Bumont. "However, if he shot her in a passion during a quarrel and then suddenly realized what he had done, he might have been overcome with fear and fled in a panic."

"Could be," I said. "I haven't given either him or Beele a clean bill of health yet, especially with the evidence that points toward Beele. It is possible that either one of them may be guilty of the murder as Beele certainly is of the threats and the robbery."

Bumont seemed satisfied. "I want you to keep on until the right man is found, Cray," he growled.

"I expect to," I said grimly. "By the way, I had quite a chat with Mrs. Renwick after I got through with the maid at the Lane home this afternoon. She

interests me exceedingly."

The Colonel shot me a sharp look from his blood-shot, pouchy eyes.

"In what way?" he snapped.

"Oh, as a beautifully groomed woman with something on her mind," I said casually.

"Nonsense," the Colonel retorted. "Maude is as clear as a crystal."

"She could know something."

"Know what?" Bumont asked quickly.

"What I wish I knew. Yesterday, Colonel, I asked you about the Lane estate. Can't you give me any definite dope on what it will run to and how it will be divided?"

"I told you then and I tell you now," Bumont bellowed, "the value cannot be determined without a formal accounting, which will be done as soon as possible after the funeral, which will take place tomorrow. Then, as Lila has made no will and died a minor, the disposition of the assets will have to be decided by the Chancery Court. Mrs. Renwick, Sims and myself are the closest kin. The other relatives are distant. I am not even sure I know who they all are."

Bumont's French phone stood on the desk in front of me and as I talked I had been fingering the dial.

"Quit monkeying with that phone," Bumont yelped as if exasperated. "If you want to use it, pick it up and use it and if not, let it alone."

"My God, Colonel," I said, "your nerves must be on edge. I didn't realize what I was doing, but I do want to call Frank Finch."

"Go ahead, then," said the Colonel and while I dialed a number he got up and paced back and forth across the floor, his head down and a scowl on his big face.

I told Finch I wanted to see him and would be over at once if it suited him.

He said it did and I got up to go.

"I'm not trying to tell you your business, Cray," the Colonel began slowly, "but if I were you I'd keep an eye on Sims as well as Beele. This thing has broken me all up. No wonder my nerves, as you say, are on edge. I was tremendously fond of my niece."

His voice rose as if he were addressing a jury.

"If it is the last thing I do in this world I want to find the scoundrel who killed her and send him to the chair."

"Let's hope it won't be, Colonel."

"Won't be what?"

"The last thing you do in this world. Because I think we'll find him pretty soon," and with that I went out.

CHAPTER XV

FINCH sat at his desk in the station, placid as usual, a benevolent smile on his clean-cut, intelligent face.

He lit a cigar, leaned back in his chair and absently rubbed the thin spot on the back of his head.

"Well, Mike, what's the news?"

I told him of my interviews with Claire and Mrs. Renwick and Bumont. He listened without interrupting until I had finished and then said mildly:

"Looks like I sized up the chauffeur situation pretty well. Anyhow, we'll soon know, for Beele is awake and can talk."

"Has he?"

"No, because I've had nobody to send to Charlottsburg. All I know is that the hospital people there phoned that Beele had come out of his coma and that the doc said we could talk to him."

"Suppose I run up there, Frank?" I suggested.

"Be glad if you would, Mike," Finch assented. "As you know, I'm short-handed and you might as well earn the money Bumont is going to pay you."

"I'm on my way," I told him.

I stopped only to phone Terry Wood at his home to relieve Durfee and to keep an eye on Sims as far as it was possible to do so all night and to let Durfee relieve him again in the morning.

Then I got in the Chevvy and started. It is only a fifty mile drive to Charlottsburg so I was there before dark, although it was getting dusk when I drove in and parked in front of the hospital building.

Charlottsburg has a nice little hospital on a slope of a hill on the edge of town, with ample grounds around it, filled with flower beds and trees. I've always fancied I'd like to take a few days off with some very minor complaint and be tended by a pretty nurse in just such a hospital.

After inquiry at the desk I found Beele in a ground floor room at the back of the place with a fat cop in uniform sitting just inside the door. I showed the cop my credentials.

"Boy, I'm glad to see you," the cop said. "My belly thinks my throat is cut. I was supposed to be relieved at seven, but nobody has shown up. If you will stay with this bum a bit, I'll go out and get something to eat and see why the station hasn't sent a relief."

"Go ahead," I said. "Run along and feed your face and I'll hold the fort . . . How are you, Beele?"

"Well enough," Beele answered sullenly. "My head aches but I'm all right. Who are you and what do you want?"

HE WAS sitting up in bed, propped against pillows, his long legs stretched beneath a single sheet, a hospital gown over his muscular chest. He was a big good-looking brute, with a dark, olive-skinned face and big black eyes. Tall, well-made, powerful; no wonder he had given both Lila Lane and

the French dame thrills.

"I'm Mike Cray, private dick," I told him and flashed my badge. I pulled up a chair to the bed and sat down. "I'm associated with the police in the Lane case at the request of Colonel Bumont."

"That big stiff!" sneered Beele.

"What did you kill Miss Lane for?" I asked.

"I didn't kill her. I know nothing about her murder."

"Then why did you run away? And how about the cash that was found on you?"

"I can explain all that," Beele muttered.

"It will take some explaining," I retorted. "The Rigaud doll has admitted meeting you downtown. She admits driving out to the house with you to loot the safe. It looks as if you might have stumbled on Miss Lane and, surprised and scared, pulled your rod and croaked her. At least, that is the police theory. By the way, where is your gun?"

"The cops here took it and if you all are as smart as you claim to be you can probably determine that no bullet from that gun killed Lila Lane."

"You've read up on ballistics, eh?" I sneered. "Murder or not, we got plenty on you. Maybe you don't know it, punk, but a burglar who packs a rod, whether he uses it or not, can be sent to the chair in this state."

"Aw, be yourself, flatty," Beele sneered in turn. "It isn't burglary to enter a house in which you work, by the front door, with a key. As for the gun, I have a permit for it."

"On top of everything else, you wrote those kidnap notes. That can bring in the Feds and you know the penalty, don't you?"

"Who says I wrote them? I'd like to see you prove it. Say, you got a cigarette?"

"I don't use them," I said, "but when that cop comes back, I'll have him get you a pack, provided you act pretty. By the way, ain't there a gaboon around here any place? I need a chew."

"I think there's slop jar under the bed," said Beele.

Twenty years, all told, on the force and private dick should have taught me better, but we all get careless some times. I bent over to peer under the bed and the roof came down on my noggin.

THE next thing I knew I was trying to open my eyes and see through the waves of pain that blinded me. When I did get them open I gradually realized that the fat cop was back, that he and a couple of nurses and a doctor were bending over me where I lay on the floor, and that chauffeur Beele was not among those present.

"What hit me?" I groaned.

"Beele must have crowned you with the water pitcher," the fat cop grinned, and I realized that I was drenched as well as groggy. "Oh, boy, you smart guys from the big town! How come you give him a chance to crown you?"

"Where is he?" I asked, trying to get up.

"That's what we'd like to know," cried one of the nurses. "He must have put on his clothes and skipped out through the window."

I peered out into the dark tree-shaded grounds. They made a swell place to play hide-and-seek.

"You got an alarm out?" I asked the cop.

"I ain't had no time. We just found you," he said. "I'll turn in one now, but Gawd knows how far he's got by this time. It's an hour since I left you. How long you been out?"

"How the hell should I know?" I asked him crossly and struggled to my

feet. Lord, how my head hurt! But the pain in my head wasn't the worst part. Me, Mike Cray, letting myself be knocked cold by a punk!

The doctor came over to me and put his fingers on my wrist.

"Take it easy," he ordered. "Lie down on the bed and let me look at your head."

I was glad to lie down for a moment for the room swam around me. The doctor's trained fingers went lightly over a bump that felt as big as an orange. He lifted a lid and looked into my eye.

"No concussion," he decided. "You must have a good thick skull."

"Thick, if not good," I agreed.

"Skin unbroken, but a peach of a bruise," he went in. "You better get your clothes off and get into bed."

"The hell I will," I answered. "I'm okay and I gotta find that guy." I slid my feet to the floor.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Where are you going to look for him in the dark?"

"I won't have to do it by myself," I told him grimly. "The cops here will help me comb the town."

"It's your head," said the doctor. "Suit yourself."

The Charlottsburg cops were nice. They didn't grin too much although it was hard for some of them to keep their pans quite straight when I told them my story. They gave me all the help I could ask for and we went through the little town but it proved useless. Beele was gone, probably in a stolen Packard that was reported while we were out on the chase. There was nothing for it but for me to go back to town.

BEFORE I left I phoned Finch at his home. He was gravely sympathetic when I told him how Beele had bopped me on the bean, but I thought he re-

strained a chuckle. It is hard not to be amused when a friend gets a kick in the pants.

"I hope you're not badly hurt, Mike," he consoled me.

"Hell, no," I assured him. "I haven't had so much fun since pop fell in the sewer and got drowned."

"Think Beele had hid out in Charlottsburg?" Finch asked.

"We believe he left here in a stolen Packard, Frank." I gave him the license number of the missing car. "You might put an alarm on the radio and tip off the state police."

"I'll do those little things, Mike," Finch promised, "but as he was headed north when he crashed, don't you think he'd keep on that way? He's had time enough by now to get into Maryland."

"Sure, he might," I agreed, "but when he started yesterday he had a fat roll and he left the hospital without a dime on him. By the way, the cops here turned over to me the money and the gun they took off Beele. My hunch is that he could make a touch or hide out easier at home than in any other place, so he might double back."

"I get you," said Finch. "I'll do what's necessary at this end. Can you drive all right?"

"I can make it," I told him grimly.

"Take it slow," he advised. "Call me in the morning will you?"

So, with my tail between my legs and my head humming like a juke joint I started the Chevy and rolled toward home. I hadn't gone ten miles when a Packard doing at least ninety swept by me as if I was standing still. It was going so fast it was impossible to catch the plates but I thought they might check with those of the stolen car.

"Maybe," I thought, "my hunch that Beele would double back wasn't so wrong."

I promised myself that the next time

our paths crossed that bird would be sorry.

I made my foot heavy as I could and tried to push the Chevy up to the speed of the Packard but it was no dice. That big heap had too much power and too many trucks were moving in both directions. Even if No. 1 is a four lane road it is no place to play tag at night. After trying in vain to keep an eye on the Packard's tail light I had to give up and slow down. I could only hope the drag net Finch had promised to put out would function but, as I learned the next day, it had too many holes in it.

CHAPTER XVI

MURDER is like liquor. After the first drink, the second goes down easy. One killing seems to give a murderer zest for another. After all, he can be executed only once.

I woke Saturday morning with the phone bell exploding in my ears. As I sat up the room began to revolve and I was conscious of a darned sore head, but by the time I had the receiver off the hook and to my ear the furniture stopping reeling and things settled into place. My tin alarm clock said 8:45.

It was Finch. His voice was as mild as ever but held an urgent note.

"How are you this morning, Mike? All right after the bump you got?"

"Yeah. I'm all right."

"Good. Then you better get out here to the Lane place as soon as you can. Somebody bumped off Mrs. Renwick last night. Somebody could have been your friend Beele. And Colonel Bumont is here raising hell."

"I'm practically there," I told Finch and hit the floor. I shaved and showered in seconds. I stopped downstairs for nothing but a cup of coffee and I drove into the Lane grounds in less than forty minutes after Finch's phone call.

Finch was in the front hall and with him, dominating the scene, was Colonel Bumont putting on his best bull act.

"What in hell am I paying you for, Cray?" he roared. "Where in hell have you been? You have let Maude be murdered right under your nose."

"Hold your horses, Colonel," I said. "You haven't paid me anything yet. You hired me to find out who was threatening your niece and then to find out who killed her. I have been, and am, on that job. You made no suggestion that I act as body-guard to Mrs. Renwick. If you want me to quit now, just say so, and I'll dump the whole mess in Frank's lap."

"No, by God," stormed the Colonel. "Maybe you're so puzzled you'd like to drop out but when I make a deal I go through with it."

"Okay." I told him shortly, "so do I," and turned to Finch.

"What's the dope?" I asked.

Finch led the way through the house to the glassed-in screened sun parlor that projected from the east side. On a wicker chaise lounge lay the body of Mrs. Renwick. Her flower-patterned white negligee showed the brown stain of dried blood and there was a clotted pool on the floor beneath.

The porch had been fitted up to serve as a summer room. On a table at the side of the chaise lounge stood a lamp, a tall half-filled glass apparently containing lemonade, and ash tray, a cigarette case and a couple of magazines. By the side of the lounge, as if dropped from the dead woman's hand, lay a book.

Mrs. Renwick's face, as yet not much changed by death, wore a calm and pleasant expression. She did look older dead than alive; fine lines showed around her eyes and the rouge stood out against her blood-drained cheeks.

The photographer and the fingerprint

crew were still at work. The medical examiner, Finch told me, had come and gone. He had placed her death at midnight or shortly after.

“SHOT through the heart?” I asked as I noted the position of the stain on the flowered robe.

“Yep. We apparently have an expert marksman to deal with,” observed Finch. “The Lane girl was bored straight through the forehead; this dame, straight through the heart.”

“Was the shot fired from inside or outside the screen?” I asked.

“We can’t find any hole in the screen,” one of cops said, “and the screen door opening on the terrace outside was unhooked when we came. Looks like she let in some one she knew who plugged her without warning.”

“Who found her?” I asked Finch.

“The Rigaud girl. When she came down this morning, almost the first thing she noticed was that the door from the rear parlor to this porch, usually closed and locked at night, was open. So she looked out and saw the body and had a fit of hysterics. When she recovered enough to call the Colonel, he notified me and we came out. Everything was as you see it. Then I phoned you and that’s the story up to date.”

“You didn’t have the house covered last night?”

“I had not seen the necessity,” said Finch stiffly.

“Who would?” I said. “Who else was in the house last night with Mrs. Renwick?”

“No one is known to have been here except the maid and Mrs. Tankin, the cook.”

“And there won’t be any one here tonight,” grunted the Colonel, who had dropped into one of the big wicker chairs and was pounding on the arm with his closed fist. “We’ll have to lock the

place up. Both women have given notice.”

“Well, Colonel, you can hardly blame them,” said Finch mildly. He looked out over the smooth lawns, the neat flower beds, and ranked shrubs and shady trees. “Lovely,” he observed, “but apparently not a very healthy neighborhood. However, I think the women must stay here a while.”

“Nobody hear a shot?” I asked.

“Nobody admits it. If either of the women did hear it, she thought it was a back fire. You know how we all do that.”

“Yeah,” I grunted. “You got the bullet?”

“Yes,” said Finch. “It went clean through her and was embedded in the floor. You can see where the boys dug it out. From the angle, I think the person who shot her was standing close above her.”

“You will be able to tell if it was fired from the same gun that killed Miss Lane,” I suggested.

“Dedrickson will, and soon,” promised Finch.

“You and your guns and your pictures and your bullets,” snorted the Colonel.

“I see Mrs. Renwick’s hands are ringless. Did she usually wear any?” I inquired of Bumont.

“Why, yes, I think she did,” growled the Colonel.

“Seems to me that I remember seeing rings on her hands yesterday,” I added.

“Well, Fingers Gentry didn’t get them. That’s a sure thing,” commented Finch.

“Somebody did if she had them on. Let’s talk to the women,” I suggested.

WE WENT back to the chromium and glass library and left Finch’s crew to their measures and finger prints.

We seated ourselves and Bumont

rang. Then he wandered restlessly over to the book-shelf bar, made it revolve, and poured himself a good hooker of Bourbon, in which Finch and I both declined to join him.

In a moment Claire came in. She was still as smartly garbed as a musical comedy maid in a black dress, frilly white cap and apron, sheer black silk stockings and high-heeled patent leather pumps. Her eyes were red and her face swollen, even more so than on the day before.

"Sit down, Miss Claire," said Finch pleasantly. "Tell us what you know about this."

"Oh, *m'sieur*, I know nothing at all!" Tears began to trickle from her eyes and with trembling fingers she had recourse to the corner of the her apron.

"When did you see Mrs. Renwick, last?" Finch inquired.

"It must have been about ten," Claire stated. "She called me and asked me to make her a pitcher of lemonade and bring it to the porch. She was sitting on the chaise lounge, reading a book. I made the lemonade and she told me I could go to bed. I went. This morning, when I came down, she was there, as you see her. I telephoned Colonel Bumont and that is all that I know."

Finch ruffled his thinning hair and smoothed it down again.

"You heard no shot, no noise of any kind."

"Non, *m'sieur*. Or if I heard, I thought it was a back fire. It seems to me now that I might have heard it without being enough impressed to awaken fully."

"Did Mrs. Renwick have any phone calls last night?" I chipped in.

"Why, yes, the Colonel: he called about nine o'clock."

"That's right," Bumont agreed. He heaved up his big bulk, crossed the room, got an ash tray, bit off the end of

and lighted one of his big perfectos. "I called Maude to ask how she was getting along. She was all right then."

"No other calls, Claire?" Finch asked.

"*Non, m'sieur.*"

"Did you notice whether or not Mrs. Renwick wore any rings last night?" I queried.

"Why, yes," she said. "I am sure she had on her wedding ring and a solitaire diamond that she always wore, and her wrist watch. They are not on her hands now?"

"No," I said. "See Charles last night?" I shot at her suddenly.

"That *vaurien*? *Non!*"

Bumont's bushy brows went up and he turned to Finch.

"Have you brought Beele down from Charlottsburg and can he talk yet?"

"He got away," said Finch dryly. Evidently Finch had not told the Colonel of my mishap.

"What!" Bumont bellowed. "You let him get away? *More* police inefficiency! I don't know which is the worse, private detectives or the regular force. Where is he?"

"That, I admit, we would like to know," said Finch calmly. "We'll find him."

I HAD watched Claire as this interchange went on. Her breathing seemed quicker and she turned her head anxiously from Finch to Bumont and back again.

"*Ma'm'selle*," I said roughly, "you are a fluent liar but not a very good one. I've a hunch you saw Charles last night. Come clean and tell us about it."

"*Nevaire! Ne jamais pas!* I did not! *C'est absolument faux!*" she broke into a violent storm of incoherent French mingled with sobs and violent movements of her head and hands.

"Calm down, calm down," Finch said

at last. "You may go now, but don't leave the house. Tell Mrs. Tankin we want to see her."

"Well, I'll be damned!" ejaculated Bumont. "Do you think Beele was here last night? What time did he get away?"

"Soon enough to have been here before midnight," I answered glumly. "If we don't get our hands on him soon we'll take another crack at that doll."

The door opened and Mrs. Tankin came in, squat and shapeless in her white smock and soft shoes. Her garb accentuated her red face and she looked as belligerent as usual.

"Sit down, Mrs. Tankin," said Finch in his pleasant way.

"I'll stand," she shot back, as she had on Thursday.

"I said *sit down!*" repeated Finch without raising his voice but such a steely edge to his tone that the fat woman collapsed in surprise into a chair.

"When did you last see Mrs. Renwick alive?" Finch asked.

"Around six o'clock yesterday afternoon," said Mrs. Tankin sullenly. "She came into the kitchen and said she was all broken up—not that she looked it—and that she couldn't face eating dinner all alone in the big dining room. She told me to fix her something light and have Claire bring it to her room. That's the last time I saw her breathing. I fixed her a bowl of soup and a salad and —"

"Hear any shot last night?" Finch interrupted the menu.

"I did not," she stated defiantly. "After Claire and I had our suppers I went up to my room and stayed there. It's on the other side of the house and I naturally wouldn't hear a noise on the sun porch. But I did hear a noise in the lane."

"What kind of noise? When?" Finch asked.

"Some time during the night I heard

a car drive up and stop near the back gate. I didn't pay any particular heed and I s'pose I dozed off. After a while, I heard it start off again but I thought nothing of it at the time. The lane is dark and lonely and plenty of petting goes on in it almost every night, but I don't take any notice of such disgusting doings. Young folks nowadays—"

"Is there anything else you can tell us, Mrs. Tankin?" broke in Finch.

"Wait a moment, Frank," I said and turned to the fat cook.

"Did you know that your nephew, Guy Tankin, came to this house Thursday afternoon with one of the gun men we have in jail, for the purpose of robbery?"

MRS. TANKIN'S mouth opened and her jaw dropped. She looked as if she wanted to cry and then her face hardened.

"I know nothing about that little bum," she said viciously. "He's my brother's child and my sister-in-law has tried her best to raise Guy right and proper but she can't do anything with him. He drinks and loafes and stays out all night—"

"And steals," I broke in. "How do you suppose he knew the house would be empty Thursday afternoon? When were you at your sister-in-law's?"

"Wednesday night," said the fat woman.

"Did you mention that you expected to go with Claire to the movies Thursday and that you could both get off because Miss Lane planned to be out?"

"I might," Mrs. Tankin admitted sullenly. "I don't remember."

"Think Guy could have come out here last night, possibly with Beele, and had any part in this?"

"How do I know?" answered Mrs. Tankin indignantly. "I didn't see him. I told you I knew nothing about the

dirty little whelp. He's a shame and disgrace to a decent family. He has taken some little things but he's never been mixed up in murder. If you all are so smart, why don't you find out where Guy was last night?"

"We will," I promised her. "Where does his family live?"

She gave me the address.

"Anything else you want to ask Mrs. Tankin, Frank?" I said.

"Not now. You can go," Finch told her.

"You're right I'll go," muttered the fat woman, "and the dust of this house I'll be shaking off my feet for good and all as soon as may be."

"Exactly. As soon as may be," Finch echoed, "but I want you and Miss Rigaud both to stay on the lot until I say you can leave it. Colonel Bumont tells me you have both given notice. I'll leave a couple of men on guard here until the case is closed so you will have protection. But here you stay, or in jail as material witnesses. Take your choice."

Mrs. Tankin stood up, her heavy red arms akimbo, and looked at Finch as if she would like to blast him from the earth. Her red face became purple but she restrained herself and finally left the room without another word.

Finch looked at his feet and gently rubbed his head. Then he turned to the Colonel.

"Beele got away from the cops at Charlottsburg," he explained with a sidelong wink at me. "He stole a car and he may have come back here. We put an alarm on the radio and notified the state cops, but he could have slipped into town a dozen ways over side roads. The money he stole from Miss Lane was taken from him at Charlottsburg, so he was flat. He may have come back here to hide or to raise a stake. He could have killed Mrs. Ren-

wick and stripped off her rings and watch. He may have gotten some money from Claire. She may even have helped him. The Tankin boy could have been in on the play but I see no special reason for thinking he was."

"By God, it all fits," gloated the Colonel. His greedy gray eyes blazed over their pouches in his big red face. "Now all you've got to do is to find him!"

"It fits except for one thing," I reminded them. "What did he shoot her with? The Charlottsburg cops took his gat and I have it in my pocket."

I PULLED it out and the Colonel sagged back.

"Be careful with that thing, Cray," he sputtered. "I don't like guns. He could have got another, couldn't he? If the Tankin boy was with him, perhaps he had one."

"Possibly," I admitted.

"Possibly and probably," persisted Bumont, and added regretfully, "I have been thinking, though, ever since you smart boys decided the gunmen didn't do it, that Sims may have killed Lila."

"By the way, Mike, you had a tail on him, didn't you?" said Finch. "Do you know where Sims was last night?"

"I haven't had time this morning to get in touch with my operative," I replied, "but I can get him on the phone in a moment."

"Do it, will you, Mike?" suggested Finch.

I went to the phone in the hall and called Terry Wood.

"Terry? Mike Cray. Were you in touch with Sims all last night?"

"Chief, I'm sorry." Apology struggled with a yawn in Terry's voice. "He came down from his rooms about ten and went to the parking lot just off Main where he keeps that old Ford of his. I had my heap parked in a different corner of the same lot. When he

stepped on his starter, I stepped on mine and was ready to follow him, and found I had a flat. Chief, I just had to let him drive off. I don't know when anything like that has happened to me before."

"Hard luck, Terry," I said, "but it can't be helped. What did you do?"

"The only thing I could do. I waited for him to come back which he did about midnight. He parked his car and went back to his rooms and to bed, I suppose. This morning he came down and went to work. I'd had my flat fixed, of course, so I tailed him down to the office and turned him over to Sam."

"Well, it's water under the bridge, Terry. Don't blame yourself. Pick him up again tonight."

I went back and told Bumont and Finch what had happened and the Colonel exploded all over the place.

"You boys have certainly accomplished wonders so far," he snarled. "Aside from picking up a couple of gangsters that you decide are not guilty, whether they are or not, you let all the other suspects slip through your fingers. I've got to go to my office. See if you can't do something right. Find Beele; find out where Sims went last night. Find that Tankin boy. Do something!"

He glared at us with his blood-shot pouchy eyes, seeming to enjoy our discomfort.

"Here, Colonel," I said and pulled out the money that had been taken from Beele at Charlottsburg. "I reckon this belongs to the estate."

It amounted to \$980, all in new twenties and a handful of change. The Colonel leafed over the bills carefully and handed me ten of them.

"Take these, Cray," he grunted. "You twitted me a while ago with having paid you nothing. Now you have your retainer. For Pete's sake, do something to earn it. Give me some action. I

want the murderous brute that killed Lila and Maude sent to the chair!"

I was too crestfallen to attempt a comeback and the Colonel strutted off to his car apparently highly pleased with the way he had bawled us out.

Finch didn't help out either. He had glossed over my part in Beele's escape before the Colonel and had kept still when I told of Wood's failure to cover Sims. Now he rubbed his head harder than usual and reflected:

"Maybe we *are* a couple of dumb clucks, Mike!"

Well, it was nice of him to say "we".

CHAPTER XVII

FINCH rode back with me to the station. We let conversation lapse. In his office Finch settled in his swivel chair and sent for Lieutenant Dedrickson.

"We've got another murder," he told the tall, spectacled lieutenant. "Mrs. Renwick, Miss Lane's cousin and companion, was shot last night. Here's the bullet that killed her. Here's a rod that may have been used in the murder of Miss Lane. It was not used last night. I want to know if this bullet and the one that killed Miss Lane were fired from the same gun. How soon can you tell me?"

Dedrickson's eyes gleamed with pleasure behind his glasses.

"In a few hours, Cap," he promised. "I'll get to work on them at once."

Finch glanced through the reports on his desk.

"Heck!" he cried, "here's some news. Beele must have come back here. The Packard that was stolen in Charlottsburg was found this morning abandoned, and out of gas, in a side street just off Monument Avenue not many blocks from the Lane home. I wonder if Beele *is* the guy we want!"

"I want him," I told Finch grimly. "Murderer or not, he took the money. He's due to answer a Federal rap on a threatening letter charge. And I got a personal score to settle with that bird. You bet I want him!

"What have you done with the mobsters?" I added.

"I think they're clear on the murder," Finch decided. He rubbed his head slowly. "I'll have them arraigned in court Monday morning. Kovick will get a stretch for assault, and Gentry for robbery. They both tried the stick-up at Griffin's place and both were carrying concealed weapons. That will be plenty to put them on ice for a while and we'll know where they are if we want them. What are you going to do next, Mike?"

"Things," I told him briefly. I was still sore at the way events had broken during the last few hours, and most of all at myself. I bit off a chew and got in the Chevvy and drove to my office.

It was nearly noon and I found Arden as pretty as a picture to look at and as rough as pig iron to listen to.

"A pretty time in the day to show up!" she began. "What's been keeping you? How can I run an office without knowing where the boss is? I'd have thought you were still in bed if I hadn't called the hotel and found out you had left. Where on earth have you been?"

"Investigating a murder," I told her. "Mrs. Renwick was shot and killed last night."

Arden's brown eyes opened wide and became grave.

"Tell me what happened, Mike," she said in a different tone of voice.

"Some party unknown put a bullet through her heart," I answered and gave her the details briefly.

Arden, cool-looking and fragrant in white, with a touch here and there of red, leaned back in her chair, crossed her pretty legs and tapped her teeth

with her pencil. Some say red-headed gals shouldn't wear red, but Arden could and make you like it.

"I wonder—" she began.

"So do I," I said shortly. "Want to do an errand for me?"

ARDEN brightened up at once. "Of course, Mike."

"You know Mrs. Armstrong Karey pretty well?"

"Certainly. She and mother are old friends."

"I want you to run out to her house and have a chat with her. Mrs. Renwick claims to have lunched with her Thursday although you thought you saw her with Colonel Bumont at Mite's."

"I did see them," insisted Arden.

"Mrs. Renwick is also supposed to have played auction there all afternoon," I went on. "I presume she did play cards there, but I want it checked."

"Meticulous Mike," murmured Arden. She got up and reached for the thing she called a hat, pleased as Punch to be given a chance to do some amateur detection.

"Don't be fresh," I snapped, "and listen. Find out when Mrs. Renwick got there and see how long she stayed. Find out who else was there. And see if you can learn anything about any telephone conversation she may have had while she was there."

"I'm on my way," Arden chirped. "For heaven's sake! Where did you get that bump on the back of your head? I didn't notice it before. You poor thing!"

Her cool and delicate fingers touched the sore place lightly. My arm went around her and I gave her a little squeeze

"Just a trifling accident," I told her. "Wait until you see what happens to the other fellow!"

"Who did it?"

"Charley Beele, that punk that drove for Miss Lane."

"What! Has he turned up?"

"Yes, on again and off again, like Finnegan. He was picked up by the Charlottsburg cops after he wrecked the Lane car near there Thursday. I went up to see him last night and collected this little souvenir. He got away through my carelessness but we're pretty sure he's back here in town. When I find him I'll collect principal and interest—with usury," I promised.

"Do you think he killed Lila—and Mrs. Renwick, Mike?"

"It isn't what I think but what I can prove that counts," I said. "You run along now and see Mrs. Karey. Get your lunch while you're out."

"Oh, I think I can wangle that out of Mrs. Karey," said Arden. "Will you be here when I get back?"

"I dunno," I told her vaguely, "but if I can't get back by closing time I'll try to give you a ring. Now beat it."

She stuck out her tongue and vanished.

CHAPTER XVIII

I ROLLED out to the Beele home. The city directory supplied the address, a dilapidated frame house on Oregon Hill. The streets of that section are lined with shabby, box-like, two-story houses with tiny untended front yards enclosed in broken pickets. Wide front porches stretch almost to the uneven brick sidewalks. Day and night most of these porches are filled with slatternly women and slovenly men who seem to have nothing to do. The women shout across the rail or street to one another and both streets and sidewalks are filled with shrill-voiced children, squirming tots and barking dogs.

Number eleven Quince Street was the

Beele address. If the Beeles had ever been one of the first families, they had come down a long way, I decided as I pulled the old-fashioned bell and waited. A big, barelegged, full-breasted girl with her hair in curlers and her feet in patent leather pumps with run down heels answered my ring.

"Charles Beele live here, sister?" I questioned and flashed my star.

The girl gave me a frightened look. "Charley don't live here any more," she whined. "He don't hardly ever come to see us. He works chauffeur for Miss Lila Lane and lives out there."

"I know all that," I said. "You've seen the papers. Has Charley been here since she was shot?"

She shook her head.

"We ain't seen him for weeks," she insisted. "Charley ain't mixed up in it, is he? His Ma is worried sick."

"We don't know," I said. "He beat it right after the shooting, which looks bad. Any notion where he might hang out?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"What boys did he use to run with?"

"I wouldn't know," she evaded, and shifted a wad of gum. "Charley don't tell us his affairs."

"Surely he must have some pals in the neighborhood."

She started to shake her head again, then reconsidered.

"He and Guy Tankin used to be pretty thick. Guy's aunt cooks for the Lanes. It was through her that Charley got his job."

"I believe the Tankins live on Peach Street?" I asked.

"Yes, they do. But I expect you might find Guy this afternoon at Mrs. Riley's," the girl tittered. "He hangs out there a lot."

"Thanks, sister. If Charley should come home," I warned her "tell him that the best thing he can do if he is innocent

is to report to Capt. Finch at headquarters at once."

"I'll tell him if he shows up," she promised, "but I ain't looking for him none."

I knew about Mrs. Riley's place. It was one of the infinitely numerous nip joints that had sprung up under prohibition and which had continued after state control, known to, but generally ignored by, the police. In prohibition times they had sold moonshine; now they sold legal liquor, illegally obtained, at outrageous prices and moonshine as well.

Mrs. Riley's house on Peach Street was not far. I parked at the curb in front of the door and rang the bell. The door was opened by a broken-nosed little man in a collarless shirt and beltless pants. I recognized him as Pop Riley who had once been a promising lightweight but who had finally taken the count from John Barleycorn.

"Hello, Pop," I said. "Guy Tankin here?"

He stared at me with blurred eyes.

"Who would be wanting him?"

"Me, Mike Cray," I told him and showed him my badge cupped in my palm. As he hesitated, I pushed by him and walked through the hall toward the back of the house. The bar of these nip joints is generally the kitchen and from that direction I could hear noise and laughter. Pop pattered along behind me.

THE kitchen was hazy with cigarette smoke. On the table in the middle of the room stood a cluster of beer bottles, half-full or empty, a fruit jar filled with white liquor and a few dirty glasses. Three men lounged around the table, a couple of half-shot stumble bums and a young fellow I recognized as Guy Tankin.

The three looked up as I entered and

Mrs. Riley sprang up from a rocking chair in which she had been sitting.

A head taller than her husband, buxom, red-cheeked, black-haired, Rose Riley was a good-looking woman, attractive enough if you liked 'em tough and gamey.

"Who are you?" she shouted at me. "Who invited you in?"

"I'm Mike Cray, Mrs. Riley. Nobody invited me in. I thought any one was welcome who had the price of a drink."

"You ain't," she retorted. "This is a private house. These are just friends of mine. I don't sell liquor. What do you want?"

"A chat with this young man here," I said and nodded toward Tankin.

The boy regarded me, dead-pan, without speaking.

Mrs. Riley, charged with her own liquor, chose to be ugly.

"He don't have to talk to you," she screamed at me. "Get the hell out of here. This is a private house."

"Easy, easy, Mrs. Riley," I told her and gave her a flash of my star.

"Cop, eh? I ain't afraid of cops. I got a row of them buried in my cellar."

"Just a private dick," I said.

"Regular or private eye," she yelled, "you get out. You got nothing on me. This is no nip joint. These are just friends visiting me and having a glass of beer quietly among ourselves."

"You've got me wrong, Mrs. Riley," I tried to explain to the virago. "I'm not here to interfere with your business, which is none of mine. If you've got pull enough at the City Hall to run a nip joint, it's no skin off my shins. All I want is a talk with Tankin, and, if he's on the premises, with Charley Beele."

I looked her straight in the eyes as I mentioned Beele's name and her black eyes bored back into mine.

"Beele I don't even know," she lied.

"Whether Guy talks to you or not is his business; he don't have to if he don't want to.

"Oh, yes, he does," I said and turned to Tankin. "This isn't a pinch. I just want you to come out to my car where we can talk privately and give me a little info."

"I'm no stooly," Tankin finally spoke, scarcely moving his lips. "I don't know nothing you want to know. I ain't going nowhere and I ain't going to tell you nothing."

"That's right, Guy," Mrs. Riley shouted. "You sit still. He admits he ain't a regular cop. He's got no warrant. You don't have to go with him."

"Yes, you do," I repeated. "I told you this wasn't a pinch but I can have a squad car here in five minutes and make it one. Will you come along now peaceable and pleasant, or do I have to do it the hard way?"

"Nuts to you," said the boy.

"Scram!" screamed Mrs. Riley.

TANKIN was a weedy, undersized little rat. I grabbed his shirt by the back of the neck. It was hanging loose over his pants and half open in front. I stripped it down so it pinioned his arms and swung him out of his chair. He struggled and hung back.

"Lemme alone!" he squealed. "I got nothing to say to you!"

"Leggo of him!" yelled Mrs. Riley. "Slug him, Pop!"

I half turned without releasing Tankin and saw that Pop had assumed a fighting stance and was close upon me. As I turned toward her husband, Mrs. Riley rushed to the table, pulled a wicked-looking carving knife from a drawer and whirled back toward me. Tankin squirmed in my grip; the other loungers stared with gaping mouths.

I dodged Pop's swing and gave him a straight left to the belly that doubled

him up like an accordion and he went down in a heap. He may have been a good boxer in his day but I outweighed him sixty pounds and outreached him six inches. As Mrs. Riley came at me I heaved Tankin on top of the fallen box-fighter and grabbed her wrist. I pivoted and brought her forearm behind her back in a hammer-lock. She twisted and screamed and dropped the knife. I kicked it into a corner.

"Shut up," I ordered, "or I'll break your arm," and put on a little more pressure. It was no time to be gentle with that wildcat. I tripped her and flung her on top of Pop and Tankin. They made quite a heap. Then, just for the hell of it, I kicked the table over on them. The jar of liquor broke and the pungent stink of corn filled the room.

With one hand I pulled my gun. With the other I dragged Tankin out of the pile and followed by curses and the stench of the moonshine, propelled him rapidly through the hall, out into the street, and into the front seat of the Chevy. I paid no attention to the crowd that the noise had brought to the gate.

"Sit still, you little punk," I told Tankin, as I kept him covered, "or I'll blow your guts out." I climbed over him, half squashing him in the process, and started the car with one hand, my gun against his ribs. "Why couldn't you have come along nice and quiet? All I want is a little information."

Still guiding the car with my left hand, I lost no time in leaving the neighborhood. A few blocks and a couple of turns took us through the gates and into the peaceful quiet of Maplewood Cemetery. I drove a few hundred yards and stopped in the shade of a tree.

"Now damn you," I said, "will you sing pretty or do I have to slug you? I can do that, or I can carry you down to the station and let the cops do it regu-

lar.”

“What do you want to know?” Tankin whined like the cornered rat he was.

“Where were you last night?”

“Playing pool at Dago Pete’s the early part of the evening. I was around at Riley’s from ten until one or two this morning. What’s the squawk?”

“Were you at or anywhere near the Lane house last night?”

“I was not. Why?”

“You were out there Thursday afternoon. Fingers Gentry told us that,” I informed him.

“If he gave you straight goods you know I wasn’t in the house. When he came out and told me the girl was dead I beat it.”

“You tipped him off that the house was empty and drove out there with him. Do you realize that makes you an accessory to robbery and perhaps to murder?”

HE WAS scared but still defiant.

“Nuts,” he sneered. “I got nothing. I never waited for any cut. Gentry said she was dead when he went in. I didn’t know he took anything. I didn’t tip him off, either. I didn’t know what he planned to do. I just went along for the ride.”

“Sez you. Were you out there again last night?”

“I told you I wasn’t. What happened last night?”

“Don’t you read the papers? Mrs. Renwick was shot last night.”

“My God!” the boy cried. “I didn’t know nothing about it. I just got up a little while ago and went around to Riley’s to get something to help the hangover I had from last night. I hope to die if I’ve been within twenty blocks of the Lane house since Thursday.”

“You’ll die some day soon and in the chair if you don’t change your ways,” I said. “Guy, why don’t you brace up,

straighten yourself out and get a job?”

“Where’d I get one?” The boy began to whimper. “The cops have it in for me. I’ve been picked up several times, just like now, for nothing.”

“You’ve been in jail at least twice,” I answered. “You don’t get sent up for nothing.”

“Is that so?” he retorted. “I was framed and railroaded both times. The cops wouldn’t let me keep a job.”

“There are two kinds of fools, Guy,” I said, “those who give good advice and those who don’t take it. Just because I’m the first kind, don’t you be the second. If you want to get right, come to my office Monday and I’ll see if I can give you a hand. Meanwhile, when did you see Charley Beele?”

“I saw him at Riley’s for a few minutes last night.” Tankin grudgingly admitted.

“What did he have to say?”

“Not much. He said the cops were trying to pin the Lane murder on him but that he had nothing to do with it. He was trying to make a touch so he could hole up somewhere until the heat was off.”

“Did he?” I asked.

“I didn’t have nothing to give him. I think maybe he got a few bucks from Mrs. Riley.”

“What time was this?”

“Around midnight,” said the boy sullenly.

“Did he say anything about having been at Lane’s last night?”

“Yes. He said he went out there and slipped in the back way and saw that French gal, Claire.”

“I thought so.”

“He tried to get some dough from her, but she was scared and sore. She wouldn’t give him anything and told him if he didn’t beat it away from there she’d call the cops. So he scrambled. He didn’t mention Mrs. Renwick and

he didn't act as if he had just plugged anybody."

"Where did he go from Riley's, or is he there yet?" I pressed him.

Tankin was silent for a few moments. Finally he broke out:

"Oh, hell, I s'pose you'd find him anyway. Try Danny Gibbon's joint—the Astoria."

AS WE sat there, a funeral procession came into the cemetery and drove by us: the undertaker's car in front, then the pallbearers in two machines, then the hearse. Behind the hearse was a long black shiny Lincoln with a colored driver and on the rear seat, each ostentatiously disregarding each other by looking out opposite windows, sat Colonel Bumont and Philip Lane Sims. I suddenly realized that Lila Lane was on the last journey of her brief and hectic life.

In the stream of cars that followed I recognized Stanley Gebson in one and Margery Twitchell in another, and last of all I saw my operative, Sam Durfee, dead-pan in his Ford, trailing Philip Sims according to his instructions.

A tag of Latin from my high school days buzzed in my brain but I couldn't quite remember it. It wasn't "*sic semper tyrannis*," nor "*pro bono publico*," neither was it "*e pluribus unum*" nor "*dulce et decorum est*."

"I got it," I said to myself. "*De mortuis nil nisi bonum*". Well, by all accounts she was a first class bum, but God rest her soul!

CHAPTER XIX

DOWNTOWN I dropped off Tankin, with a muttered promise from him to see me Monday, which hasn't been kept on any Monday yet. Then I drove on down into the "Bottom".

Clustered about the railroad stations

of every large city are third and fourth-rate hotels. Our Union station is in the section we call the "Bottom" because it lies in a basin where a creek, now covered and part of our sewer system, once emptied into the river. This was the head of navigation when the first settlers landed, and here the city began.

The oldest, it is naturally the shabbiest, dirtiest part of town and in it are the cheap hotels. They cater to sailors, up for a few days from Norfolk; to floozies and unsophisticated country folks; to any one who prefers a cheap and dirty room to comfort and respectability. Among such hotels there is usually one that caters definitely, if secretly, to criminals and it was near this, The Astoria, that I parked. They all have fancy names like that.

The Astoria is a four-story dingy brick dump just around the corner from the station. It is run by Danny Gibbons, ex-con and petty ward heeler, well and none too favorably known to the police.

The lobby is just a cubby-hole, with a cigar counter doubling as a desk in front of a key rack and pigeon-holes for mail. Behind it I found a bald-headed, broken-toothed relic with one glass eye squatted on a stool.

"Let me have a squint at your book," I told him and gave him a glimpse of the badge cupped in my hand.

He shot me a sour look but brought out a dog-eared register.

Under "Saturday, July 23", written across the page in perfect Spencerian copper-plate were six names. Two of them were of women whose monikers indicated their profession. One couple from Beaverdam was registered as man and wife. Of the two remaining names one stood out to me like a neon sign: "Carlton Bradford, Baltimore." Almost always a man uses the same initials as his own in inventing an alias. "Brad-

ford" had been assigned to room 318.

I turned the book toward the clerk and put my finger on the name.

"This guy in?"

"There's the house phone. You can try," creaked the ancient clerk.

"Connect me," I said and put the receiver to my ear as the clerk put the plug in the switchboard. Nobody answered.

"I think he must be out," volunteered the old man crossly.

"What does this Bradford look like?"

"Search me," returned the old man.

"He registered this morning before I came on."

"Ring him again."

"He must be out," insisted the clerk.

"He don't answer."

"There's no key in his box."

"Could have took it with him," suggested the old fellow. "Half the folks don't turn in their keys when they go out for a short time."

"Maybe so," I agreed. "Let me have a pass key. I'm going up and see."

"I dunno's the boss would like it," the relic demurred.

"Who cares? Danny doesn't stand any too well with the force now. Don't put him in any worse."

RELUCTANTLY the old man handed over a key. I crossed the lobby and rang for the elevator. An evil-faced boy with whisky breath and a dirty uniform ran me up in the bare creaking box to the third floor.

"If you want anything, call No. 1," he muttered, as he let me out. "I kin git you anything you want."

I walked down the hall without answering.

The door of 315 swung open and a bold-faced blonde, a light cigarette in one hand, her pink silk kimona not too tightly held together with the other, peeked out.

"Hey, big boy!" she greeted. "Look-

ing for some one?"

"Not for you, sister."

"You could do worse," she bragged.

"If it's Mabel, she's out. Come on in. You can send out for a pint and we'll have a party."

"Go back in and read a good book," I advised her. "I'm busy."

She cursed me casually but shut the door. Some dump!

At the end of the hall a red globe over the window indicated a fire escape. 318 was the last room on the left side of the corridor. I knocked on the panel. No one answered. I edged over to the side of the door and tried to put the pass key in the lock, but no dice. Another key was inside the lock.

I knocked harder.

"Beele," I called, "this is the law. Open up!"

Still there was no answer but I heard a bed creak and the movement of stealthy feet inside. I hammered on the panel and yelled again:

"Open up, Beele, or I'll blow the lock off!" I shouted. "You're merely making bad matters worse!"

The feet moved across the room. Then I heard the sound of a window shade going up. I stepped back and drove my heel squarely against the lock with as much weight as I could put behind it but the lock held. The blonde stuck her head out of her door and began to scream.

Inside 318 I could hear the window go up with a scraping sound. "The fire escape!" I thought and rushed to the hall window. It stuck for a moment but I got it up and thrust out my head just in time to see Beele swing from his window to the iron ladder outside.

Down he clattered. Down I tore after him. Together we made almost as much noise as a fire truck, with the screams of the blonde behind me for a siren. Beele reached the level of the first floor and,

not taking time to unhook the last section of the ladder, stooped, hung by his hands and dropped into the alley beneath.

That's when I paid off for the bopp he handed me the night before. As he hit the ground, spraddled out on all fours, I dropped on top of him. He went out like a light and when I picked myself up, he was still out.

I turned him over, pulled his hands behind his back, and slipped a pair of cuffs on him. None too gently, I hauled him to his feet. Heads pushed out of the windows above us. The blonde was out on the third floor fire escape landing now, her pink kimona flying, screeching at the top of her voice. A colored cook in a white cap and apron came out of the back door and a crowd sprang up from nowhere all around us.

I GOT hold of Beele's coat collar with one hand, drew my gun with the other, and poked him ahead of me through a door that opened into a kitchen.

"Where's the phone?" I yelled at the fat cook.

I waved my gun in his general direction and he evidently decided I meant business.

"This way, Boss, this way," he answered hastily and I followed him to a phone in the hall that led from the kitchen toward the front of the hotel.

"Dial the police station," I told the cook and gave him the number. "Ask for Captain Finch."

When the connection had been made and Finch was on the line, I slipped my gun back in its shoulder holster and picked up the phone with my left hand. I still had Beele in my grasp and I propped him against the wall as I talked. He was too groggy to make any trouble.

"Frank," I said to Finch, "I've got Beele, with cuffs on this time. I'm at

the Astoria. Send the patrol wagon down to the alley back of the dump. Beele's half out. When he comes to, see if he'll talk, will you?"

"You bet I will, Mike," Finch promised. "The wagon will be around in five minutes flat."

When it came I turned Beele over to a couple of husky cops, shoved my way through the crowd to my car in front of the joint and drove to my office.

Arden was sitting at her typewriter looking as cool and fresh as I felt hot and dirty.

"Mike!" she cried, starting up as she looked me over, "what ever happened to you? Your hat is broken, your shoes are scuffed and you've torn your trousers!"

I sat down in front of the fan and took a fresh chew.

"All that doesn't matter, sister," I grinned. "I haven't had so much fun since the hogs ate my little brother!"

"Don't be revolting! What have you been doing?"

"I just had a little race down a fire escape with Charley Beele. He finished first but I was a good second," and I gave her the picture. "What did you get?"

"A rather curious story," Arden answered and her big brown eyes seemed puzzled. "I had a nice chat with old lady Karey, all about 'do you remember' and 'you know when we' and then I delicately led up to what you wanted me to find out.

"It seems that the contract game was for two-thirty. Mrs. Renwick did not lunch with Mrs. Karey. Mrs. Karey was under the impression that Mrs. Renwick had lunched downtown."

"We know about that, thanks to your eagle eye," I interrupted.

Pleased, Arden nodded.

"Mrs. Renwick reached Mrs. Karey's early and said that she expected an im-

portant telephone message. She used the phone to make one call and then planted herself in the living room close to the phone.

"Mrs. Karey remembered that when it rang Mrs. Renwick jumped up, said: 'That must be my call' and took it herself."

"Did Mrs. Karey listen?"

"Being a lady of the old school," Arden sparkled, "she didn't, or at least she says she didn't. She says that she strolled out of the room and didn't return until Mrs. Renwick had hung up. But she did notice that Mrs. Renwick seemed flustered and she says that her game that afternoon was extremely erratic. Does this help any, Mike?"

"I think so. You did a very swell job, Arden."

"I think that perhaps I have a natural talent for detection," Arden observed gravely.

"Sure you have. I've got to go around to the station and see how Finch is making out with Beele. You hold the fort. If I'm not back by closing time, go home."

"I'll try to get in touch with you if anything happens," Arden said. "You better get a new hat on your way to the station. And, for heaven's sake, have your pants mended!"

I grinned and went out.

CHAPTER XX

"**Y**OU must have been rough with your friend Beele," said Finch.

He leaned back from his desk and laughed.

"The boys brought him in practically ruined. And"—Finch snickered, as he looked me up and down—"you seem to be a bit battered yourself."

I hadn't had time to follow Arden's instructions.

"I kind of fell on him," I informed

Finch, "and while I don't weigh as much as Man Mountain Dean, I'm no featherweight. I did get mussed up a bit and I think I swallowed a chew of tobacco. I don't feel so good. Has Beele talked any?"

"Oh, yes, he talked," replied Finch. "I've just finished with him. He told practically the same story the Rigaud girl told, only, according to Beele, she planned the job. She was crazy about him he says—"

"The woman tempted me and I did eat," I interjected. "Sweet character—Beele."

"A dirty louse," Finch corrected. "He'd been pretty intimate with her and she was hot to get married. She told him she had heard Miss Lane phone Gebson to bring her a thousand dollars and she thought that if they got that and the jewelry and the car, they could beat it out of town, get married and get out of the country before they were caught. He swears the Lane dame was dead when they got out to the house and the two things bear him out."

"What things?"

"The bullets that killed Miss Lane and Mrs. Renwick were both fired from the same gun. But neither was fired from the gun taken off Beele at Charlottsburg. Dedrickson will stake his professional reputation on that. But the bullet that was fired through the mirror did match Beele's gat. He admits that and he admits the kidnap letters but he says he was just fooling. He was trying to scare some money out of Miss Lane but he had no intention of killing her or actually kidnapping her."

"Sez he," I remarked.

"What he confesses is enough for us to turn him over to the Feds," Finch said, smoothing his thinning hair, "and I think that to save the city the expense of a trial, that is exactly what we will do. They can have the Rigaud doll as

an accessory too."

"I doubt if they can make that stick," I mused, remembering Claire's gams and their probable effect in court.

"However," I went on, "if Dedrickson's tests are correct and I have no doubt they are, the murder gun is still missing. Frank, do you remember my telling you that Sims claims that an automatic he owned is missing?"

"Yes," said Finch, "and I think it would be a good plan for you to see Sims again. I've never been entirely satisfied with his story."

"I intend to see him tonight," I said. "Sims hasn't been out of my mind for a moment. I've had a man on his tail night and day since Thursday."

"Except for a while last night, during the time Mrs. Renwick may have been murdered," put in Finch slyly.

"I know, Wood slipped up, but I don't see how he can be blamed."

"Sims could be the man we want," Finch went on. "He had two strong motives, cupidity and hate. We have only his word that he left his cousin alive on Thursday."

"Gebson saw him drive off."

"He saw some one drive off, Mike. If it was Sims he could have driven back, couldn't he? He could have waited around and driven back after you talked to her at two o'clock." Finch rubbed his head. "Say, you know anything good for dandruff?"

"Frank," I said, "there's one person I'd like to talk with myself, that handy man of Lane's. What was his name?"

Finch leafed through his note book.

"Abraham Lincoln Jones," he said, and supplied the address. "But Bunt gave him a clean bill of health."

"I know," I admitted. "He was at Mrs. Anderson's at one-thirty but I'd just like to know where he was between twelve o'clock when Mrs. Tankin put out his lunch and the time he reported

to Mrs. Anderson."

"What does it matter?" Finch said. "Miss Lane was alive at two o'clock."

"I just want to know."

"All right by me," smiled Finch.

I set off to find the namesake of the martyred president.

CHAPTER XXI

IT WAS Saturday afternoon and I found Abraham Lincoln Jones at home. His plump wife showed me through the neat little house they rented in Jackson Ward to the shady back porch where Jones was calmly snoozing. He was a sturdy negro of fifty, pleasant and polite.

"I been wonderin', Mr. Cray," he said, when I told him my name and business, "why nobody been to see me. I thought when theh was murdeh, the police done scarified everybody on the scene of the crime."

"We may be a little slow, Jones, but we get around," I explained. "We checked on your whereabouts Thursday afternoon and found that you were at Mrs. Anderson's from one-thirty until five-thirty. That seemed to let you out."

"Tell me about yourself," I went on. "How long had you worked for Miss Lane and what did you do?"

"Man and boy, I worked fo' Miss Lane and her people for nearly fohty years," asserted Jones proudly. "I done tend to everythin'. I cut the grass, I fixed the floweh beds, I washed the windows and looked afteh the furnace. I didn't live on the lot, as you see, but I was out theh every mornin' by eight o'clock and stayed as long as theh was anythin' to do."

"You were there Thursday morning, then?"

"Sure, boss. I cut the grass that mornin' and that's a job, all them big lawns. About noon I knocked off. Mrs.

Tankin and Miss Claire, they was goin' downtown, but befo' they go, Mrs. Tankin she fixed me some vittles and I ate 'em in the kitchen. Afteh they left I went out on the back po'ch and smoked my pipe and maybe I took a few minutes' snooze. Then I went out the back gate. Mrs. Tankin said they was all goin' out and she didn't know anythin' mo' fo' me to do."

"What time did you leave?"

"Must have been around one o'clock like, or a little later. I walk down to Mrs. Anderson's, perhaps half a mile, and went to work in her gyarden about one-thirty."

"Did you leave the back door locked?"

Jones' honest brows drew together.

"You know, I been worried about that. Seems like I set the spring lock befo' I closed it and seems like maybe I didn't. Fo' God, I just can't be certain sure."

"See anybody hanging around the lane when you left?"

For the first time Jones hesitated in his answers. His face was grave and sweaty.

"I didn't perzactly see anybody, but theh was a cyar drawn up undeh a tree not far from the back gate. Theh was a man in it but he was kind of slumped down in the seat and I couldn't see him good. I didn't pay him no mind. Afterward—"

"Afterward, what?" I queried sharply as Jones stopped.

"Seemed like it might have been Mr. Sims' old Fo'd."

I had to stop and take a chew then.

"Jones," I said, "this is serious business. Could you swear to the man or to the car?"

"Fo' God, I couldn't. You see, I paid 'em no mind at the time. The cyar was parked west of the gate and I turned east so I didn't pass by it. After-

ward, when I heard what had happened to Miss Lila, I got to thinkin', but I jes' don' know, I jes' don't know!"

The man's honest distress was obvious.

"All right," I consoled him, "don't worry about it. Did you go out to the Lane place yesterday?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Cray, I did. I see in the papeh Thursday night what happened. The next mornin' I went to the house as usual. Mrs. Renwick told me they was all upset and that I needn't stay.

"So I come back home and this mornin' I heah somebody shot Mrs. Renwick too, so I thought I betteh stay home until somebody told me somethin'."

"You heard no shot before you left Thursday?"

"No, suh. Nothin' like that a-tall."

I LOOKED at my watch. It was nearly six. I said goodbye to Jones and went to the nearest drug store and phoned to the office. Nobody answered so I figured Arden had left. I called the station and found that Finch had gone home also. I know that Bumont would be expecting a report from me, but I assumed he had left his office, so I skipped that and drove back to my hotel.

I got a shower, changed my clothes and went down to the dining room and spoke for a double order of ham and eggs, some French fries, a green salad and a pot of coffee. I had finished and was thinking things over as I sat at the table and stirred my second cup of Java when a bell boy called me to the phone.

"This is Philip Sims," said a voice on the other end of the line. "Could you meet me in my room tonight?"

I started to tell him that we were two minds with only a single thought but I refrained.

"Might could," I hedged. "What's it

about? You didn't talk pretty enough to me Thursday night to make me crave any more of your conversation."

"I'm sorry," said Sims. "Something has come up that I want to talk to you about. Not over the phone. Could you make it by eight sharp?"

"Oh, I reckon I can," I promised. "Be seeing you," and hung up.

So I drove leisurely around to the General Insurance Building, where I found Terry Wood waiting quietly in the shadow of an adjacent doorway.

"Follow me up to the third floor, Terry," I instructed him, "and wait for me somewhere in the hall. I'm going in and have a chat with Sims."

"Right, Chief," said Terry.

CHAPTER XXII

THE narrow dirty stairs and the long gloomy hall that led to Sims' rooms were dimly lit by an unshaded low-powered bulb that swung from the ceiling at the stairhead.

I tramped down the echoing corridor to his door and knocked.

"Who is it?" came Sims' thin whining voice from within.

"Cray," I answered and heard the bolt shoot back. The door opened and Sims' thin face peered out. He held his horn-rimmed specs in one hand and his eternal book in the other, his thumb marking his place.

"Come in."

He motioned toward the Morris chair and seemed to make an effort to be cordial. "Sit down. I'm glad you came. I've been wanting to see you again."

"Yes?" I said and took the chair while Sims sat on the bed as he had on Thursday night. "By the way, where were you last night?"

"Here, most of the evening."

"You took a drive between ten and twelve," I reminded him.

Sims stared. "How do you know?"

"I've had a tail on you since Thursday afternoon."

"What for?" he asked angrily.

"I had two reasons. One of them is that I wanted to know where you went and what you did. Where did you go last night?"

"Why do you ask if you had me followed?" Sims sneered.

"To see if your story checks. It was between ten and twelve last night, you know, that Mrs. Renwick was shot."

"If you had me shadowed, you must know I wasn't near the Lane house last night," Sims cried indignantly. "Why should I be suspected every time some one is shot?"

"Because you don't tell the whole truth?" I countered, "but we'll skip last night for a moment. I never have been satisfied with your story of Thursday afternoon. You left your office at twelve o'clock. You didn't get back until after two. The Lane place isn't much more than a fifteen minute drive from your place of business. You said you weren't with Miss Lane over fifteen minutes. What were you doing all that time?"

"Why, I told you—"

"Cut out the stall," I snapped. "Jones, the handy man, saw you sitting in your car outside the back gate around one o'clock. Your first story was that you left the premises at twelve-thirty. If you didn't kill your cousin, you know something; something that might be dangerous to you. You may not realize it, Sims, but you're in a spot."

That got him. He drew a thin hand across his sweating face.

"I do realize it. I'm going to tell you the whole thing," he decided. "In fact, I had made up my mind to do so; that's why I phoned you tonight. Last night, incidentally, I simply went out to get some air and to think. I drove down the Curls Neck Road for some twenty

miles and back again, as I suppose you know, if you had me watched."

"Could you prove it? Stop anywhere for gas, or a beer, or see any one you know?"

SIMS was in a cold sweat now. "No, no, no. But your man who shadowed me—"

"Lost you," I told him grimly, "so you can't establish an alibi by him. But as I said before, we'll skip that now. Go back to Thursday afternoon."

Sims seemed a little relieved.

"All right," he said, "everything I told you was true but there is some more and I'm going to tell you now."

"Okay, and don't leave out anything."

"I got to the house about twelve-fifteen," Sims began. "I saw Lila and asked her to lend me the money to buy those books just as I told you. She turned me down flat; laughed in my face. I wasn't there more than fifteen minutes. During that time I saw the cook, the maid and the chauffeur pull out of the drive in the Packard. When I went out I saw Gebson driving up.

"I was boiling. I felt sore at myself that I hadn't been able to put up a better argument. Those books meant a lot to me but Lila's sneers and laughter had tied my tongue. I decided that if I could get my thoughts in order and disregard Lila's attitude I could present my case more convincingly. I determined to try again. So I drove around the corner and parked in the lane back of the house where I could see Gebson's car. I figured that Gebson would have to get back to the bank and that he wouldn't stay long. You say Jones saw me there?"

"That's right."

"I didn't see him; I guess I had my eyes glued to Gebson's car. When he drove off, I got out and went in the back gate and walked through the garden. I

was going over in my mind what I wanted to say to Lila. I was going to be so plausible and so firm she couldn't turn me down. That's the way with guys like me," Sims spat out bitterly. "We can frame such fine arguments when we are alone and when we try to express them we fumble around and flunk out.

"I came to the kitchen door and thought that if it was not locked I would go in that way. It wasn't so I went in and started through the butler's pantry that separates the kitchen from the dining room. The side windows were open and through them I suddenly heard the scuff of tires as a car came to a stop in front of the house but I couldn't see it from where I was. Somebody stamped up the steps, opened the front door and entered the hall. I tried to open the door from the butler's pantry to the dining room to peek through but it was locked on the other side. I couldn't see through the opaque glass. I didn't know whether Gebson had come back or if it was some one else. I just stood and listened. The steps went up the front stairs. I heard some one call out and I heard Lila answer. Then, almost at once, there was a noise that sounded like a muffled shot, the sound of a fall and the clatter of steps racing back down the stairs.

"I ran back through the kitchen and started around the house but before I could see the car it had vanished. I didn't know what to do. I edged around in front of the house and tried the door. It was locked. There was no one, nothing in sight. You know the nearest house is a block away and that shrubbery screens the house from the street. I was puzzled and I was scared. Finally I just went back to my car and drove on down to the office."

SIMS had finished. He was white and shaky. He pulled out his handker-

chief and mopped his sweaty face.

"Why didn't you tell me this the other day?" I said sternly. "You must have known that you heard the shot that killed Miss Lane?"

"How could it have been? It was not much after one, certainly no more than one-fifteen. According to the papers you and Colonel Bumont both talked to Lila at two o'clock."

"I talked to a woman at two o'clock," I told him. "Not necessarily Lila Lane. We haven't television yet. And you must have an idea who killed her."

"I hadn't then."

"But you have now? Well, so have I," I said. "What I think happened is this although I can't prove it yet. This was a long-planned crime. Miss Lane would have come into full control of her money on her twenty-first birthday next month. There have been rumors that Colonel Bumont is hard up. I think he had dipped so heavily into the estate that he had to kill his niece to prevent an accounting. I think that the woman to whom I talked on the phone was Mrs. Renwick. I believe Bumont killed her last night, either because he feared she would weaken and confess, or because he wanted her share of the estate also. They had plotted together, but I think he preferred her money to marriage. If my last reason is right, he may want yours also. This is the other reason I've had one of my operatives tail you, as much to guard as to watch."

"I had half come to the same conclusion," said Sims "and that is why I asked you to come tonight, although I couldn't quite get over the telephone conversation that I understood had taken place between you and Lila after I had left the house the second time. But at the funeral this afternoon, the Colonel told me he wanted to see me tonight on business connected with the estate. I thought that sounded damned

fishy but I told him that while I had to be out early this evening I would meet him here at nine."

I looked at my watch.

"It's nearly nine now," I observed, "and I think he's on time," for I had caught the sound of heavy steps in the hall.

Sims was sickly white and as shaky as a snow-bird off the dope.

There was a rap on the door.

"My God, Cray, he'll kill me," Sims whispered.

"No, he won't. Let him in. I'll cover you from behind that curtain."

Sims trembled so that I was afraid he couldn't go through with it, but he mustered up his spunk and went to the door as I slipped quietly into the passage the curtain masked.

Sims shot back the bolt and opened the door. The Colonel barged in. I could see perfectly from my concealment.

"Well, Phillip," said Bumont suavely, "all alone?"

"As you see, sir," quavered Sims.

The Colonel looked around with satisfaction. An expression of greedy pleasure shone on his big red face but there was a look in his eyes that was not quite sane.

"Phillip," the big man began without further preamble, "I've come to return your pistol. I borrowed it a couple of weeks ago, the night I had to wait for you here. I'm going to shoot you with it and then the case will be closed and everybody satisfied including the silly police and that damn fool Cray."

HE BEAMED up on the shrinking Sims and produced a .38 automatic. As I had suspected, a silencer was fixed to the muzzle.

"I'm going to shoot you," Bumont went on, "wipe off the prints and put the gun in your hand. A suicide note

will be found on your table—”

“I haven’t written any suicide note,” squealed Sims, “and I’m not going to.”

“I’ve saved you the trouble,” gloated Bumont. “A client of mine that I saved from a long stretch for forgery has written out a very neat little confession and signed it for you. Want to hear it?”

Without waiting for an answer, the Colonel pulled out a sheet of paper and read in his hoarse voice:

In remorse for the killing of my cousin, Lila Lane, whom I shot after an argument, and of Mrs. Renwick, who suspected me, I have resolved to end it all and may God have mercy on my wicked soul.

(Signed) *Phillip Lane Sims.*

“Nice touch, don’t you think?” Bumont chortled. He tossed the paper to the table. His red face suffused with blood, his eyes glaring, Bumont caught Sims by the back of his shirt collar and swung him around away from him with his left hand so that he could place the shot in Sims’ right temple.

My old army .45 was in my hand. I have always carried a .45. Unless you hit a man in a vital spot with a .22 or a .25 you are liable merely to annoy him. A .32 or even a .38 is uncertain, but the shock of a bullet from a .45 almost anywhere in the anatomy will knock a man flat.

I suppose I might have taken the Colonel without winging him, but he had a gun in his hand, he might have got Sims first and it doesn’t pay to fool with a crazy man. In any case, I was so disgusted with Bumont’s cold-blooded cruelty and conceit that I wanted to hurt him.

The bullet from my .45 caught him in the shoulder and the Colonel went flat. Sims fell with him. I sprang out and kicked the .38 into a corner. I

pulled Sims up. He staggered and fell over on the bed. Bumont lay in a struggling, groaning, bleeding heap.

I went to the door and blew my whistle, unnecessarily, for Terry Wood was in the hall and coming fast.

“Get to the nearest phone,” I told him, “and get hold of Finch. If he isn’t at the station, tell the sergeant to send a squad car and an ambulance. I’ll take care of this dirty so-and-so in the meantime.”

Only my sweet and gentle nature restrained me from booting Bumont in the ribs.

THE cops were there in a matter of moments and the ambulance followed. The intern gave the Colonel first aid and they were putting him on a stretcher when Finch arrived.

“What goes on, Mike?” he questioned as his eyes roved over the scene.

“It’s all over except the trial,” I told him, “and if ever a skunk went to the chair, Bumont deserves to go. I’ve been pretty sure since Thursday that he was the bird behind the scenes but now we’ve got the evidence.”

I showed Finch the gun and the suicide note.

“Dedrickson will find,” I said, “that this is the gun from which the bullets that killed Miss Lane and Mrs. Renwick were fired. I believe that Mrs. Renwick’s rings will be found cached in Bumont’s desk or safe.”

I jerked a thumb toward Sims, who was beginning to revive.

“Got any of that Scotch left you had the other night?”

Sims clambered to his feet and fetched the bottle from somewhere.

He handed it to me with a glass and I poured out a stiff one.

“Here,” I ordered, “drain it down. You need it.”

“Aren’t you going to join me?” Sims

stammered. His teeth were still chattering.

"Maybe Finch will," I suggested. "For you, it's medicine. For me, I'll just have a chew of tobacco and be on my way."

"You say you've been leery of the Colonel since Thursday?" asked Finch, after he had downed a slug of Scotch, mentioning, by way of apology, that he was off duty and had come from home when the desk sergeant relayed my call.

"Lila Lane was dead when I first went to Bumont's office," I explained. "It was Mrs. Renwick who impersonated her over the phone. Right there the old boy made his first mistake. Miss Lane's number was composed entirely of low digits, 3-1312. Mrs. Karey's number, where Mrs. Renwick took the call, is 9-7169. Try for yourself on a phone sometime without raising the receiver and you'll see how much farther your finger travels between figures when you dial a nine or a seven than when you dial one, two or three.

"I think Bumont had planned the killing for a long time. When Beele wrote those kidnap notes and cut his funny capers the Colonel thought he had a swell chance to throw suspicion on some unknown gangsters, so he struck.

Vanity ruined him. He was a big bag of conceit.

"The Lane house was secluded. He thought he could walk in and shoot without being observed and he almost got away with it. He was so vain that he thought he could not only commit murder but that he could pull the wool over my eyes and clinch his innocence by retaining me in advance. To his mind the telephone conversation was a perfect alibi. He was so proud of his first attempt that he didn't even bother about one in Mrs. Renwick's case, or perhaps he had one established that hasn't come out.

"When we had proved that neither the gangsters nor Beele could be guilty he had this pretty scheme to incriminate Sims in reserve."

"You saved my life," Sims began, "and I don't know how to express my gratitude—"

"That's all right, Sonny," I told him. "It's all in a day's work. You can pay the bill for my investigation, instead of Bumont, and believe me, it will be a good one." I didn't feel it necessary to mention my retainer.

"And make a note: never hire a dick to investigate your own crime."

THE END.

STRANGE FORMS OF PUNISHMENT

IN THE attempt to administer even-handed justice, there have been times when the law courts have literally "bent over backward." Perjury was once punished by cutting off the two fingers which the perjurer had held up in taking the violated oath. Incendiaries were doomed to be burned alive. A man, condemned to die because he had removed a boundary stone, was buried in the earth up to his neck. To make the punishment complete, he was decapitated with a new plow.

IN REGARD to suicide: The Athenians lopped off the hand of a suicide and always buried the guilty instrument of death as an accursed thing apart from the rest of the incriminated body.

PACHACUTEZ, leader of the ancient Peruvians, punished adultery with the wife of an Inca by

putting to death not only the adulteress and her seducer, but also the children, slaves, and relatives of the culprits, as well as all the inhabitants of the city in which the crime was committed. The city itself was condemned to be razed and the site covered with stones.

A FAVORITE means of punishment was to have the victim or criminal boiled in oil. Pirates delighted in tormenting their captives in this manner. In England it was the customary manner in which to deal with counterfeiters as late as the year 1700. The unlucky culprit was suspended over the bubbling cauldron and gradually lowered down into it, first boiling the feet, then the legs and so on, until all the flesh was separated from the bones and the body reduced to a skeleton.

—R. Clayton

Roulette and Old Lace

By H. B. Hickey

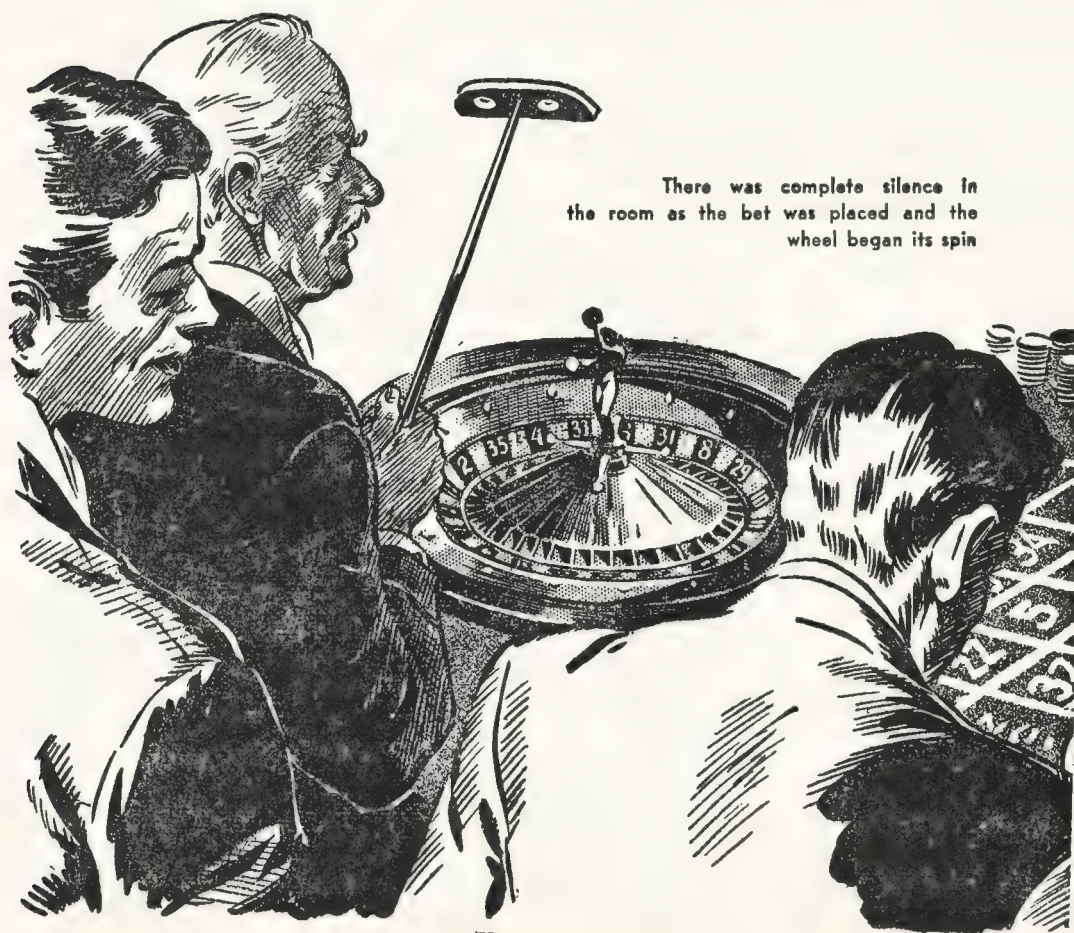
NEVER chase a streetcar or a woman," my Uncle Shpinay used to tell me. "There will be another along in a minute."

This time I couldn't wait.

I hadn't spotted the girl when she came in or she wouldn't have got in at all. Later on, Al, the doorman, swore he hadn't seen her either. Neither had the hat check girls nor anybody else. When I got my first look at her she was in the Green Room, standing at the big

wheel and sticking out of that tail-coated and mink-coated crowd like a dairy nag at Santa Anita.

It is the policy of the Villa Rouge, the super-class supper club and gambling joint of which I, Sid Mahane, am the sole owner and proprietor, not to admit anyone who doesn't look like he could drop a few hundred bucks without missing it. The price of the food, on which I just about break even, and the stakes at the tables, were a sort of



There was complete silence in the room as the bet was placed and the wheel began its spin

THERE is always an aura of mystery in
the roulette game where a player makes his
bets out of a little black book . . .



automatic bar to pikers. The few cheap-skates who figured to skip the dinner and try to run a double sawbuck up to a fortune, we turned away at the door.

This was Saturday, midnight, and the place was full and there was a lot of action. I had stepped out of the dining-room onto the double step that led down into the Green Room and cast an eye over the crowd. I couldn't miss this girl. Although she was young, blonde, and pretty good-looking, her clothes weren't. The black evening dress she wore was vintage of 1932 and as well worn as the cheap evening bag from which she drew a roll of wrinkled bills.

As quickly and unobtrusively as possible I worked my way behind the croupier so I could get an unobstructed view of what was going on. The ritzbitzes around her sort of shuddered away and gave her plenty of elbow room. She had the characteristic appearance of the desperate gambler who is putting it all on one turn of the wheel. For a second she stared at the table, which was obviously strange to her, and then, with a hopeless shrug, she dropped her little bundle on eighteen, black. Although the money was old it was in fives and tens and twenties and would amount to, a quick glance told me, about five hundred bucks. Well, if she won—and she had a chance, because my games are square—she'd collect a nice wad. Of course, she didn't win: that kind never does. While Freddie raked her money in, she kept her eyes on the table. Then, squeezing her purse as though to make sure it had something in it yet, the girl turned and headed for the ladies' room.

The significance of that squeeze and the slump of her shoulders weren't lost on me. I'd seen it before. I slid around Freddie and took off after her as fast as I could but the crowd had settled back

around the table and I made bad time. By the time I was in the clear she had a good fifty feet on me. I walked as fast as I could ignoring the hellos I got from the steady customers, but she kept gaining. I got a little frantic; in a place like mine I didn't want to yell after her or start running because it would make a scene, the very thing I was trying to avoid. It looked like I was a sure loser either way for she was almost there and going fast.

JUST as the girl got to the door of the ladies' room someone blocked her off. It was a huge white-haired man. His shoulders effectively corked the doorway. Recognition brought a *whoosh* of relief from me. Uncle Shpinay! Gracefully, his sixty-eight years weighing lightly on his toes, he turned, and using his broad back to shield her from view, he delicately maneuvered her into an alcove just to the left.

When I got to them the girl was fumbling at her purse so the first thing I did was take it away from her. I could feel something hard in it. I also got a better look at her face. The premature lines could have denoted dissipation or worry: probably the latter, I figured.

"Upstairs with you, sister," I told her. "And don't try any funny stuff. You've given me enough worry already." She cringed.

My uncle spoke kindly. "She will not make any trouble, do not fear, my boy." He slipped an arm around her and we marched her up the stairs.

"I saw you coming after the young lady and saw you wished to intercept her. I did well to intervene." His whisper could be heard twenty feet away and I glared at him.

"Well, don't spoil it now," I told him. He smiled at me, then winked at a cigarette girl who passed us coming down. She winked back.

We got our captive into my office without further incident and plunked her into a chair. My uncle beat me to the draw. Before I could get my mouth open he started in on me with his Syrian formalities.

"How is your mother, that wonderful woman?" he asked. Then, without waiting for me to reply he went on, "And your father, that prince? And your fine brothers?" He saw them all every day, oftener than I did, but he had to go through this every time.

This time it served a purpose. The girl was loosening up a little. "Well?" I asked her, "What's the big idea?"

Uncle Shpinay cut in. "She did something wrong?" he wanted to know.

"Something wrong? She wanted to do the dutch on my premises, that's all!" I opened her purse and pulled out the rod I knew all along was in there. My uncle clucked concernedly when he saw it . . . as though *he* hadn't known all along!

"What extremities of misfortune could have led one so young and fair to this?" he asked her. She gave him a blank stare for reply.

"He means," I told her, "how come a nice kid like you would want to end it all in the ladies' john of a gambling joint?" She tightened up again, and my uncle put an arm around her shoulders protectingly.

"Sidney, my boy," he reproved me, "More gently, please."

"Oh, murder!" I said, "Forget the cheap feels and let her answer my questions."

The girl stared at me. "There's nothing to answer. I just want to kill myself, that's all."

"That's all!" But I couldn't help a shiver in my spine. She sounded like a lost soul. I began really to feel sorry for her.

"Listen, kid, it can't be that bad."

"Can't it?" And then the flood! She buried her face in her hands and cried till I thought *all* our hearts would break. For once in my memory Uncle Shpinay had honest emotion on his bronzed face.

WE WAITED till her sobbing subsided and then I gave her the purse. She pulled out a little handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

"Feel better now?" I asked her. She nodded yes but she certainly didn't look it. I got a bottle of brandy and some glasses from the cabinet and gave her a stiff slug. "Drink it down. It'll make you feel better."

She got it down while my uncle put two away. He shrugged. "Truly a woman's liquor."

"The *Otta* you drink would burn the guts out of a goat," I told him. "We don't stock it at our bar."

I turned to the girl. "Well, feel like giving out now?"

"I suppose I might as well. You're determined to get it out of me, I guess." My eyes said yes so she went on. She talked fast, anxious now to get it out of her system.

"My name is Jean Edwards. I work at the First National. About a month ago my mother got very sick and had to go to the hospital. She needed specialists' care and nurses all the time. It took a great deal of money but they finally pulled her through . . . thank God . . . then the doctors said she would have to go to a dry climate if she was to live . . . to Arizona. I couldn't help it! The money was right there and I could get it . . . I didn't care . . . I don't care now. I saved her life. She left for Arizona yesterday. Monday the bank examiners come and I'll be caught. Then I thought maybe . . . maybe . . . I sub-let our apartment and I got all my clothes, everything I owned, and I pawned them and I got these and

that . . . gun . . . and five hundred dollars. I thought I might be lucky enough to win and then everything would be all right . . . but it wasn't . . ."

I was getting a little punchy. This wasn't happening in my office! It was in a movie I'd seen a hundred times; it was the plot of a thousand stories over a thousand years! It was the rankest melodrama, the purest corn! I'm no sucker; I've been around! But . . . But . . . *wise guy* . . . What do you do when it's true? *For real?*

I shook my head. "How much did you take?"

"Eighteen thousand dollars . . . I suppose that's why I put the money on number eighteen."

"Eighteen grand! That's really hitting the till. You must be pretty slick."

"A fortune! A veritable fortune!" Uncle Shpinay shook his head and gave her a respectful glance.

"I'm not clever at all. I've just been working there for a good while and it would be easy for anyone in my particular job to get away with it for a short time."

"No," I said, "It's too much. You wouldn't need all that."

"You'd be surprised. Those doctors wouldn't do a thing unless they were paid in advance. I couldn't believe it when they first told me. Then, when my mother left, I gave her an envelope with all that was left . . . most of the money. She can't work and she'll need doctor's care out there, too."

I nodded thoughtfully.

"Look, mister, let me go. You've got the gun now so I can't kill myself here. That's all you care about, anyway, isn't it?"

That clinched it. I got right up on my white horse, like Galahad. I've had a few bad breaks myself and I guess they must have softened me up for just this approach. "No!" I said, "that isn't

all I want. I'm going to get you out of this mess. I know the D.A. pretty well. I'll get my lawyer first thing in the morning and we'll straighten it out some way."

Uncle Shpinay beamed. "A prince . . . a prince . . . nothing less." He insisted on shaking my hand and even though I knew it was just his way of talking it made me feel good. Then I saw the girl's face. Yes, I was a prince!

I DECIDED to call my attorney right then. He was on a weekend fishing trip—with the president of the First National! It looked very rosy! For a few minutes we three sat and looked at each other and grinned. Then Uncle Shpinay clipped me from behind.

"My boy," he said, "I had almost forgotten the original purpose of my visit."

"Like hell you did," I said.

"So cynical," he sighed. "It is not for myself I seek the favors. And for you it is a bagatelle. A mere nothing for a man of your influence."

"Enough is too much," I told him. "I give up. What do you want?"

"Little indeed. Alex, the son of John Khaltoum, mistook another automobile for his own. The police seized him as he was getting in and arrested him."

"Why didn't he show them his car to prove it was a mistake?" I asked.

"Unfortunately he had left his at home." My uncle gave me his "that's the way the world goes" smile.

"That's just what I thought. I know his taking ways."

"He came by those honestly. His father was a camel thief in Syria; here he is a linen buyer for a fine store." He shrugged. "Come now, my boy, his mother is distraught."

I gaped at him. "The downtown station," he said, and waved his head at the phone.

Luckily, Moore was on the desk and in a minute I had Alex sprung. It would cost me plenty in free meals to square it but that didn't bother my uncle.

He grabbed the phone from me and called Alex's father. "My friend," he said, "it is fixed. Your fine son will be home shortly. And how is your wife, that lovely lady? And your most charming daughter?"

I made him hang up.

Jean Edwards was smiling at him when I looked at her. "See," I said, "I can fix anything. Doesn't that make you feel better?"

"Uh-huh." She got to her feet and wavered for a second. Then she started to fall flat on her face. I caught her, lifted her up and carried her over to the couch against the wall. On the way her dress pulled up a little and I caught her slip against the corner of the desk and tore off a bit of the hem but fortunately that was all the damage I did.

Uncle Shpinay got cold towels while I poured a little more brandy into her. In a few minutes she was all right again. I told her to stay where she was for a while and take it easy. I'd be back later. She said she would, so my uncle and I closed the door quietly and went back downstairs.

Everything was as usual, so I just walked around and talked to people I knew. In a few seconds I saw that my uncle had the cigarette girl cornered in the cloak room. Well, at least he could take care of himself, I thought. I didn't see him again until Monday late in the afternoon. Come to think of it, I didn't see the cigarette girl until then either. She looked happy, which is more than I can say for myself

AFTER a while I went back upstairs and found Jean Edwards sitting in my chair, chewing on a corner of her handkerchief.

"How do you feel now?"

She said she was much better and I saw that there was a little color in her cheeks.

Well, I'd promised to help her so I thought I'd better get busy. Now that she had decided in favor of living, my biggest worry was over.

"Where are you going to stay tonight?" I asked her.

She got that lost, forlorn look again and gave the little hopeless shrug.

"Oh, no, you don't," I told her. "Don't start that again. You'd better stay here overnight. That couch is comfortable and there'll be someone around to see you don't run out on us."

She shrugged again as though it didn't matter. So that was settled.

I went down again and kept busy for a couple of hours so I pretty well forgot about her. Around three o'clock it began to taper off and by four the last customer was out. While the boys straightened up I took the bankroll and the evening's take up to the safe in the office.

The girl was sleeping and I was careful not to awaken her. I made sure the safe was locked from force of habit but could not help throwing a worried look at the girl. Not that there was the slightest chance she could crack it. She'd need a lot more clothes than she had on to conceal the necessary equipment!

Then the boys and I closed up. I told Tom, the night watchman, to keep an eye out for anything fishy and went on home to sleep.

The office help didn't work on Sunday and I usually got down a little later than on weekdays but this Sunday I somehow couldn't sleep late. By two o'clock I was on my way back.

I needn't have rushed. The safe was still there and the dough was still in it. The only thing missing was Jean Edwards!

I checked with the cleaning women, who came in at eight in the morning, but they knew nothing. My office was cleaned only on Mondays—the other days my secretary dusted—so they hadn't even been in there. She must have left between four and eight then.

Well, it was her worry. I had other things on my mind.

Sunday's business started earlier than the other days and by ten the place was humming along. It wasn't much later than that when I got a flash from Freddie. I sauntered over to the roulette table to see what he wanted, and he motioned with his eyes toward a guy who was standing at the edge of the group making bets.

I gave the fellow the once over. He had a little black notebook in his hand and every time the wheel stopped he'd make a notation in it. Although his clothes were right, there was no question this gee was not of the upper crust. He was just a little too sharp.

Of course, that didn't worry me one bit. He looked like he had dough and if he thought he had found the fool-proof system he was welcome to try his luck. He wouldn't be the first system player who'd left his roll in my pocket. I nodded an okay to Freddie and walked off.

WHEN I got back a half hour later the sharpie was going strong. He was busier than a mosquito at the beach. He had to watch his little notebook and the table at the same time and some of the others had stopped playing to watch him.

I grinned. A little diversion never hurt.

Then I stopped grinning. He was winning consistently and for no small sums! Freddie shot me a worried stare and gave me the "bring some more dough" look. I brought it down and

got next to Freddie, so I could see better.

I didn't like what I saw one bit! This character had stopped looking at his notebook so often and was more intent on what he was betting. And he was betting big!

He had five or six favorite numbers he stuck to. Sometimes none of them hit but more often one did and, the way he was picking, the payoff was tremendous. We were stuck for plenty already and then to make matters worse some of the others hopped on.

I wanted to call it quits but couldn't for that would murder my prestige. Eventually they broke the bank and I was out over a hundred grand! I figure this one guy had three-quarters of it!

Upstairs, I cursed everybody and everything down to the man who invented roulette. Freddie sat in a corner and muttered to himself and every once in a while he'd give an unbelieving shudder. Then he'd moan softly.

I looked at him. "What do you think? How did he do it?"

"How? What do you mean—how? You know as well as I do that wheel is square! It was just blind luck. That system he was using has no more percentage than any other . . . if you could call it a system."

I had to agree. "Okay, but what if he shows up again? Do we take him on?"

Freddie was against it. "I didn't like his looks in the first place," he said, "And in the second place I'd rather take on the smartest guy in the world than the luckiest. Turn him away before he gets to the door. Take your loss and don't be a sucker by coming back for more."

No question he was right. I'd be a chump to look for more trouble. Why should I be like my customers?

That night I didn't do much sleeping. The loss wouldn't break me but it sure hurt. One hundred G's! Ugh!

The joint was like a morgue when I got down and everybody wanted to sympathize with me. I pay good and take a personal interest in my boys and they're loyal. But I didn't feel like talking about it. I went upstairs and called the bank for more dough and then sat and stared at the wall and moped. In the past I'd taken a few lickings but not like this. I couldn't stand another . . .

My uncle blew in about three-thirty. He was carrying one of his big sample cases when he walked into my office. Carefully he set it on the floor before the desk.

"Some new linens which have just come in from the old country," he told me. "Priceless . . . really of wondrous beauty."

"I don't want to see your lousy rags. I'm not in the mood today."

"I can see you are disturbed, my boy. What is it? The matter of the girl?"

I HAD forgotten all about her. "No." I shook my head. "I told her to stay here overnight but when I got in yesterday she was gone. You see anything about it in the paper?" I knew he read them all thoroughly every day.

"I looked carefully today but could find no mention of the matter. Yesterday I was too busy to look."

"Maybe they don't want it to leak out."

"It is probably as you say. But then why are you so gloomy?"

I told him. "Because some sharpshooter walked in here last night and took me for seventy-five thousand."

He gasped. "Seventy-five thousand dollars! A holdup?"

"No. Just luck, I hope."

"Why do you say you hope?"

"Because if it wasn't it could happen

again. As it is it put an awful dent in the bankroll."

"I can well believe it. Tell me more. How did this—this—catastrophe occur?"

"Roulette. I always knew I should have stuck to games I know, like horses, or cards, or dice. Oh, I've had some bad evenings before, but never anything like this. Of course, it was luck; the wheel is square and I can swear for the men who run it. Besides, it couldn't be fixed to win the way he did. Different numbers . . . he had some kind of system . . . he played four or five at a crack. The worst of it was that I couldn't stop the game. That would finish me. I had to take my licking and grin."

"The cloud may have a silver lining. There will be others attracted by tales of his success who will not be so fortunate."

"Yeah." My uncle was always quick with the optimism. I remember once, though, some guy had quit while three bucks ahead of him in a *towlay* game. My uncle followed him home, cursing him in Syrian all the way.

"Well," my uncle said, "I suppose you are not in the mood for buying linens. Even at bargain prices, that is, for such very fine merchandise."

It didn't deserve the courtesy of a reply so he got none. He bent to pick up a case and came up holding a bit of lace in his hand. He leered at me. "This suggests that your technique is rather strenuous."

"Get your mind out of the gutter. It came off the slip of that girl while I was carrying her to the couch the other night. Anyway, my technique's as good as yours—even if I don't use it as often as you."

He smiled pleasantly and bent down to pick up something else. It was the handkerchief I'd seen Jean Edwards

chewing on.

"I ought to hire you to keep my office clean," I grunted, but he wasn't listening. His mind could have been back in Syria. It turned out it was.

"I recall," he said dreamily, "a certain temple of chance in Beirut where I was a constant worshipper. Ah, the world changes but little with time. The fox continues to seek the fruit without the toil."

Before I could think what to do with this philosophical nugget, my uncle grabbed his grips and departed. His change of pace left me bewildered.

When I went downstairs a half hour later I could hear his deep bellow from up front. I walked up to see what was going on and came in on the tail end of his conversation with John Khaltoum. Why he used a phone was beyond me. He could have been heard downtown without it.

"No man better deserves your assistance, John," he was yelling. "Please keep all the help there until I arrive. Ay, ay, you are indeed a prince, John." He put the phone down and sighed. "A prince, a saviour, a friend in need."

"Is a friend indeed," I supplied.

He was startled to find me at his elbow. "Ay, ay." He was thoughtful. "I must be off, my boy, please watch my cases."

My mouth was still open five minutes after he'd left. Freddie came in and followed my gaze at the door. He shrugged. "That uncle of yours gets battier every time, boss. Ten minutes ago he made me take the cloth off the roulette set-up so he could see where that guy won the dough."

What a morbid curiosity! It upset me to have my thoughts returned to the debacle of the previous evening, so I had myself a drink. That helped a little and I had a good notion to get stiff. The trouble is that crises, like other

things, come in bunches and I wanted to be prepared for the next.

IT CAME soon. Just as the dinner crowd started coming in I got a call from downstairs that someone wanted to see me. I said to send him up. It was Alex, son of John, that prince! Oh! oh!

The instant I saw him something snapped. "Get the hell out of here," I yelled. "I've got enough trouble of my own. Get yourself a lawyer!"

"Your Uncle Shpinay sent me," Alex said. His sallow face was impassive.

"Tell him I don't want his lousy linens or his royal friends around here," I roared. "Now get out!"

Alex didn't move a hair. "Your uncle wants I should bring you."

"Maybe he's got a showroom now," I sneered. He gave me a stolid stare.

"*Ta yallah*," Alex said, "Let's go. Your uncle—"

"—wants you should bring me. I heard you the first time." I was beginning to tire. Alex was immobile.

"I got a car outside. Your uncle—"

I gave up. If I had to hear that once more I'd crack.

I got into the car in silence and stayed silent while Alex tooled the car onto the lake drive and let her unwind northward.

"Your car I hope," I finally said. "I don't want any coppers shooting at us."

"Don't worry. This thing's faster than bullets." I could almost believe it.

"I thought my uncle was downtown at your father's place."

"He was."

"Come on," I wheedled, "Talk. After all, I got you out of a bad spot the other night."

He unbent a little. "Well, all I know is I stopped in to see my old man, and your uncle called up while I was there. Then in a half hour or so he came rush-

ing into the store like a maniac. He and my father got all the sales girls in the linen and lingerie department in my old man's office and closed the door and I could hear them all jabbering in there.

"Then pretty soon, they came out and your uncle was grinning. My father told me to drive your uncle wherever he wanted to go. So I drove him up to this apartment house on the north side and he got out and went inside."

Alex took a curve on two wheels and the car skidded and for a second he had to fight to keep it on an even keel. I helped by praying.

"Then what?" I asked Alex as soon as he had the car straightened out.

"Then in a few minutes he came out and told me to go to your place and bring you back with me. That's all I know."

The rest of the way neither of us said anything. Alex wheeled us through a forty-five minute drive in about fifteen and when he finally pulled up in front of a classy building and stopped I heaved a sigh of relief.

"This it?"

Alex nodded and we went inside.

The foyer was deserted!

"What is this, a game?" I demanded.

Alex shrugged. "This is the joint, all right."

"Well, then, where is he?" I demanded.

A DOOR opened behind the desk and a woman came out to see what the shouting was about. I walked over to her and asked if she'd seen my Uncle Shpinay.

"A tall, very handsome man, with white hair, but acts younger?"

That was my uncle! I said, "Uh-huh."

"Such a charming man. So very nice!" He must have been working on her for a while. He had her doing it!

I uh-huhed again and she said, "Oh, you're his nephew. He told me when you came to tell you to go right up. I waited for you but I had to go in and give my canary something to eat."

"Would you mind telling me which apartment I'm supposed to go up to?" I asked her.

"I'm so sorry. It's Mr. Corliss's. 3C. The elevator is on the left there."

I looked and it was, so I said thanks and went over and got in and went up to the third floor. Alex stayed downstairs.

For a minute I stood and looked at the name plate on 3C and wondered who the hell J. V. Corliss was. It took quite a while before the door was opened. A guy I didn't recognize said, "Come in."

Since he had a rod in his hand and was pointing it straight at me I got in fast. In the better light inside I could see it was the character who'd taken my seventy-five grand. He looked different without the monkey suit.

The sharper waver me over to a corner where my Uncle Shpinay was seated and I sat down beside him. My uncle smiled at me.

"This is the fox?" he asked me.

I said yes and he smiled again. "The fruit," he continued, "is in that brief case there."

I looked where he pointed and saw one on the floor. It was full all right. With my dough!

I heard somebody moving around in the bedroom which was right next to the room we were in. Uncle Shpinay informed me, "Mr. Corliss's partner will be right out."

"What partner? What the hell's going on here, anyway? First you drag me all the way up here and then when I get here some guy who's taken me for a wad of dough points a gun at my guts and invites me in. Now he's got a part-

ner." But I was beginning to see light.

The door to the adjoining room opened and Jean Edwards walked in. I was beyond surprise.

"So it's you," I greeted her.

"I never saw you before in my life," she told me calmly.

"Can it, honey," Corliss told her. "The old duck will put him wise in a jiffy. And what's the difference anyhow? We got the dough and we'll be leaving soon."

My Uncle Shpinay hastened to "put me wise."

"This most charming lady," he said, "was simply preparing the way for this gentleman here when she visited your place Saturday evening. We were both, I am afraid, taken in by her masterful performance."

The girl curtsied. "Thanks for the appreciation. I thought it was a good act, too."

"I'll applaud if you'll tell me just how you rigged that wheel," I said.

My uncle explained. "The wheel has been in use for a long time, has it not?"

I nodded.

"Some of the high polish has become worn off the little pockets by much use," he continued. "It was the young lady's job to repolish all but five or six of the rougher ones with a fine wax. Naturally, the ball tended to fall into the rougher pockets when it began to slow up. That is why the 'system' was to play so many numbers."

He bowed toward the two opposite. "A very clever couple."

THE smug look on their faces said they thought so, too. I was getting mad now and began to look for an opening but this Corliss guy knew enough to stay out of reach.

Corliss grinned at my uncle. "You're pretty sharp yourself, for an old geezer." He'd hit a sore spot and my

uncle glowered.

"How'd you catch on, gramps," he asked Uncle Shpinay.

My uncle's eyes narrowed to a slit at that last crack but he smiled with his mouth.

"Once I saw the bit of lace and the handkerchief," Uncle Shpinay explained, "I realized the entire story the young lady had told us was untrue. That lace came off a hundred dollar slip and the handkerchief was the finest Appenzall. Only the very wealthy, *or gamblers*, buy such finery. One glance at the roulette wheel told me the rest."

While he talked I could see him working his foot carefully under a hassock in front of him. It just about balanced on the broad toe of his big shoe.

I gave him another lead. Besides I was interested in knowing how he managed to trail the Corlisses. "How did you find out where these two were holding up?" I asked my uncle.

"There is only one store in this city which carries such fine linens. The handkerchief had never been washed so I was fairly certain it had been purchased very recently. Perhaps, I thought, it had been purchased in that very store. Since my friend is buyer there it was easy to find out. My description of the young lady was instantly recognized by the girl who had sold it to her. The sales slip furnished the name and address."

The Corlisses were admiring. "Not bad detecting," the girl told him. Corliss nodded. "Pretty sharp for an old guy like him," he agreed.

My Uncle Shpinay's mouth tightened. "I have a very logical mind," he told Corliss. "Every event is linked to the one before it. Each cause produces its logical effect. As you shall see very shortly."

He looked mysterious after that, and it got a rise out of the gambler. "What

do you mean by that last crack?" he asked.

My uncle was silent and Corliss began to think it over.

"Who else knows we're here?"

Uncle Shpinay shrugged but said nothing. Corliss got up and walked over to us but stood just far enough so we couldn't make a sudden grab for him.

"Well, Sherlock," he said to my uncle, "it really doesn't matter because Jean and I are blowing in just two minutes. I'm going to make sure you don't trail us again." His eyes got cold and I sucked in my breath.

He looked at me and said, "So long, sucker." Then he turned to Uncle Shpinay. "So long, gramps!" His fingers tightened.

My uncle's foot shot up, flinging the hassock against Corliss's chest and knocking him off balance. The shot went wild. Before he could recover I tore the gun out of his hand. I swung it to cover the girl while my Uncle Shpinay took care of Corliss.

My uncle had him by the throat and with a huge arm raised him off the floor. With his free hand he began to slap

Corliss silly.

"So!" slap, "I am an old geezer!" slap. Corliss's face swung back and forth as though on a hinge. "You called me gramps, eh?"

The gambler wasn't listening any more so my uncle dropped him on the floor where he lay quietly. The girl was too stunned to talk.

I picked up the brief case and took a look at the contents. My dough was all there. I began to feel good for the first time in days.

"What'll we do with them now?" I asked my uncle.

Corliss stirred and shook his head groggily and my uncle looked down at him. "I do not think these two will ever trouble us again; eh, Mr. Corliss?"

The gambler groaned a feeble "no."

We took the dough and left.

On the way down in the elevator my uncle smiled at me. "A knowledge of the linen business sometimes is of great help, is it not? A most interesting occupation indeed. In fact, my boy, I have some lovely things in my cases at your office which I should like you to see."

What could I say?

HOW CONVICT LABOR BEGAN

THE early Quakers of Pennsylvania were the first advocates of productive labor as a part of a successful penal system. However, at the end of the 18th century, American prisons either had no labor at all, or had performed only the crudest of tasks, such as breaking stone or grinding meal.

It was not until the 1830's and the development of the merchant capitalists of this country that there arose a demand for prison labor. These newly-formed wealthy men generally contracted for the services of such convict labor as was desired, being in full charge of the prisoners during working hours. Needless to say, conditions under this system were not too favorable for the prisoners. This method became popular during the Civil War, when labor was at a premium.

The system was gradually supplanted by the so-called "piece-price" variety of the contract system, according to which the contractor did not

lease the men outright, but agreed to pay certain prices for work done. Where willing contractors were non-existent, the "public account" system was introduced, and the products made by the prisoners were sold in the public markets.

But after the rise of the modern labor organizations in the 1870's violent opposition naturally arose on the part of workers on the outside against this form of work. Prison labor was branded as unfair competition and free labor demanded that this type of labor cease. This outcry forced the adoption of the so-called "state-use" system, where the goods produced were used in various state institutions.

A system whereby convict labor was used to build or repair roads and other public works was evolved and received the title of the "public works and ways system." Also, prison farms were founded and the prisoners were put to work in agricultural pursuits.—*Carter T. Wainwright*



If you're going to shoot at Beethoven, you'll have to aim at a plaster figure!

Bullets For Beethoven

By Larry Holden

AT the sound of the musical note there will be bullets flying—and they won't be intended for a musician who has long been dead

THIS day I was down at Charley's having a beer with Tom Gilman, a big, sloppy headquarters dick, who wasn't getting anywhere in the department because he was too quick and too heavy with his sap. The only one he'd ever taken in one piece was the dame he married—a burlesque stripper called Ginger LaRue, who kind of played a piano while she did it. She was just as big and sloppy as he, and I guess they're about the only two in the world who could have fallen in love at first sight, and that happened in the wagon on the way to headquarters.

We were standing there chewing the fat about the apartment I had just moved into, when this guy down the bar started wriggling his eyebrows at me. He looked like a dehydrated Slim Summerville, and I thought he was just being funny and asking maybe for a poke in the snoot, but his motions became urgent, and jerking his head for me to follow him, he walked toward the door.

I said, "Scuse me, Tom," and followed him. He was hiding behind the juke box when I caught up with him. He hitched a claw to my lapel and hissed in a voice that smelled like an unwiped bar:

"Been tailing you all afternoon. Couldn't catch you sitting."

"I was in the office."

"Sure, sure," he jeered. "Me, on ac-

count of a A and B rap is hanging over, in an office! Listen," he hitched himself a little closer, "Suppose I say like this, if you can cut yourself in for five or six G's on a caper that's strictly on the up and up, you'd say yes. Right? Who wouldn't?"

I pushed him and his breath back a foot. "Give," I said.

"Nix, nix." He winked and dug his thumb in my ribs. "First it's got to be right. Right?"

"Okay," I said. "Right."

"Right." He started to inch in again, but I held him off. "Now we take it back five years and it's like this. A couple guys are pulling a job and they get busted in by the guy whose house, see? So they let him have it, and he takes a dive, so somebody's got to take it in the seat of the pants up the river. So far so good. In the meantime the two guys are off with the stuff, and it turns out one of it's this sheet music. And it turns out some guy writ this stuff by hand and it's worth plenty. Right?"

He was a right up on me on that one, but I said right, and he went on.

"Anyway, the snoops get on these two guys and one of them, like I say, takes it in the seat of the pants, but this other guy buys himself an out, so all he gets is five years for this and that, and now he comes out. So now it appears the snoops have put the finger on every-

thing but this sheet music. The widow of this honest john gets the insurance, but she's squawking she'll dicker for the music and no questions, because it means everything to her, or maybe more. So now it turns out that you're in."

FOR something like this I have long ears. My insurance accounts keep me in fish and chips, and this one sounded very familiar.

"So now I'm in," I said, but I wasn't telling him the kind of in I was planning. "Right?"

"Right," he said with another wink and dig in the ribs. "So this is the way it goes. One of these days you turn up and you say to the widow of this honest john, you say, you being a square eye and this and that, right?"

I was opening my mouth to give him another one of those rights, when he ducked under my arm and gasped, "See you in a minute," and was out the door before I could make a grab for him. The last I saw, he was going through the crowd like a beagle through the underbrush. I ran out to the sidewalk, but I'm a little too short and fat for that kind of fast footwork. By the time I got to the corner, there wasn't even a smell.

It wasn't doing me any good standing there cursing, so I went back to my beer and said to Tom, "Five years back two mugs broke into the home of a guy named Piet deGroot, and among other things lifted a portfolio of Beethoven quartets in the original manuscript, worth something up in the big G's. One of these mugs took the big burn; the other's name was Paulie Marr. Who pulled him?"

He gave me a funny look and said, "I did. We had him cold, but he bought himself an alibi and we couldn't crack it. We turned him around and took

him for five years on a stick-up he could have pulled." His face looked mean, as if he thought I was ribbing him. "Why?"

I took a drink of beer and said, "I think I was just braced by Paulie Marr for a dicker with the deGroot widow for a return of the manuscripts."

His eyes bugged out and he slammed his beer down so hard on the bar, the glass shattered in his hand and showered malt and hops up and down his shirt-front.

"What!" he grated.

"Keep your pants on," I said, "I—"

"What was the deal?"

"For God sake, Tom—"

"Brother," he said in a nasty voice, "I'm telling you something for your own good. The night that caper was pulled, Lew Bergner was on the beat and somebody's slug took him in the throat. He lost his voice, so they retired him on half pay and now he's wearing his pants out as night watchman in the Lehigh Warehouse. Now"—he grabbed my tie—"what was the deal?"

Being pushed around is one of the pastimes I swore off at an early age, but I knew how he felt, so I said pacifically, "Unpin your ears, you big lug, and I'll tell you about it. All—"

He shoved me back and my foot caught in the rail and I went down among the cuspidors and cigar butts.

"From now on," he snarled, "you're on the crap list. You're at the foot of the crap list, and if you as much as start smelling around, I'll put the arm on you and, brother, I'll put it *on!*"

He shoved out his foot and caught me coming up and I rolled around some more. By the time I bounced up, he was going through the door. I started for him like a whippet after the dingus, but two guys wrapped their arms around me and one yapped in my ear:

"Be yourself, Keogh. That sappy happy nut'll really put it to you if you

try to take him now."

It was Ben Shapiro, another head-quarters dick. He brushed off my coat and patted me on the shoulder.

"Forget it," he said. "Have a beer on me. You know what a hot-head he is. And anyway, hell, Bergner was his brother-in-law."

"I don't care if he's God's second cousin," I said thickly. "Nobody puts the boots to me."

"He didn't. . . ."

"Nuts," I snarled. "I could read the trademark on his heel."

"For Crisake, Keogh—"

I shook off his hand and walked out like a pug coming into the middle of the ring. Gilman hadn't hung around, but I walked up and down the block just to see if he'd show again. Maybe it was the way I was muttering to myself, or maybe it was the way I walked straight into them, but people kept out of my way and I had my side of the sidewalk practically to myself. You can't keep that kind of stuff up forever, and by the end of the third or fourth time up and down, I cooled off enough to know whose neck was sticking out, so I pulled it in and continued straight up Market instead of turning around for another trip. Gilman was wrong, but I couldn't think of anyone offhand who'd blame him.

Anyway, I had work to do without acting like a schoolboy. Me, forty. Next I'd be standing in front of his house calling him names.

THE Alliance Assurance Company was one of my new accounts, but I knew the manager, Roberts, well enough not to let his prissy manner bother me, although it did at first. He liked to play with his underlip, and he talked as if each word was at the end of a string he had to pull. Sometimes he waved his hands as if there was a little

orchestra in his belly and he had to lead it to keep going. But he was a sharp john and there weren't many of the angles he hadn't rounded off.

He looked at me through his rimless glasses and said, "Mr. Keogh?" as if he didn't know.

"You handled the deGroot account, didn't you?" I asked.

"Ya-a-as, ya-a-as, the deGroot account. Let me see," he drawled. He had it all at his fingertips, but he didn't like to let go. "Ya-a-as, that was—let me see—ya-a-as—uh—the Beethoven original manuscripts. . ." He went into a lot of opuses that didn't mean a thing to me, except maybe catalog numbers. "We never recovered them. Priceless, they were. Priceless. We can only hope they weren't destroyed by some ignoramus who didn't know the value. Sad affair, ya-a-as. DeGroot was killed, as I recall, in defense of his hearth and home. We settled, of course. Very sad affair."

It was sad because he had to settle!

I said, "This mug—Paulie Marr. Could it have been his caper?"

Roberts pulled out his lip as if it were bubble gum, and squinted at me over the desk. "Paulie Marr? Come to think of it, ya-a-as. Louis Sage named him. He was the one who was electrocuted. But there wasn't any other evidence, and Marr proved an alibi. We—uh—had him approached several times in prison with—uh—very tempting offers, but he stuck to his story. Ya-a-as, very tempting offers."

"How tempting is very?"

"Our company offered ten thousand, and I believe Mrs. deGroot offered another ten thousand. It seems she is president and founder of a Beethoven Society and has an artistic as well as a financial interest in these manuscripts. You realize, of course, and of course you do, that these manuscripts as—uh

—works of art do not have a fixed monetary value, and to an—uh—wealthy association like the Beethoven Society, no amount of money could possibly replace these—uh—treasures. But our interest is purely”—he waved his hands to illustrate purely—“financial.”

That was the kind of thing you had to wade through every time you talked to this guy, even about the weather. I dug myself in.

“So we can say twenty thousand,” I said.

“Oh, no, no!” He held up his hand. “Ten thousand. Mrs. deGroot’s offer may have been withdrawn, and I don’t have the authority to renew it. And now that you’ve brought the matter up”—he pretended to look at the calendar—“it comes to mind that this man, Paulie Marr, has probably been released from prison very recently. Ya-a-as, last Tuesday, to be exact. He was met at the gate by a man and a woman in a gray roadster, bearing the license 8Y-392, which seems to have been hired from a public garage. He has since disappeared.”

“Was he a kind of tall, skinny guy with a complexion that was grown in the cellar and a couple of acrobatic eyebrows?”

“On the contrary, he was—uh—short and somewhat stocky, very similar, if I may say so, very similar indeed to your own build. A very shy man, very shy, very reticent. Although it struck me when I saw him, that he’d be capable of violence of a particularly brutal nature. That wouldn’t—uh—be the man, would it?”

And I’ll bet he had to tie himself in knots to ask that much straight out. It didn’t have enough words in it for him.

“I wouldn’t,” I told him. “But if I do happen to meet this bird, and we maybe have a conversation, it could be that someday I’ll drop back here in the

office and we can pass the time of day.”

He didn’t even blink.

“Do that,” he said seriously. “Do that.”

We shook hands like a couple guys slipping one another a hot potato, and I went out. Brother!

THE afternoon was almost gone, so

I went back to the office to catch up on the mail, if any, and give this thing a quiet going over.

I wasn’t in five minutes when the phone buzzed.

A husky voice that could have been male or female said, “Keogh?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s off. Forget it.”

“Forget what?”

The low laugh still didn’t have any sex, and the voice said, “This ain’t a conversation, pal.”

The phone clicked and I hung up slowly.

The call had been too prompt to have been an accident, and I get sore when people follow me around like airedales, unless they happen to be my airedales. This case was beginning to have a lot of things that made me sore.

I grabbed the phone again and called the deGroot, but all I got was one of those voices that always turns out to be a butler. No, Mrs. deGroot was not at home. There was a possibility that she might be home later in the evening. Who should he say called? Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.

So far, all I had was this skinny guy, who wasn’t Paulie Marr, and I only had a piece of him. It didn’t look like twenty thousand dollars’ worth, or even ten.

After I had dinner, I called the deGroot a couple more times, and finally got her in around ten o’clock.

“My name’s Keogh. I’m representing the Alliance Assurance Company,” I told her. “We have a new lead on your

Beethoven manuscripts, and I'd like to talk it over with you."

"But isn't it a little late, Mr. Keogh? Wouldn't tomorrow morning do as well?"

"No."

"Well. . . ." She paused. "All right. I'll wait for you, but I've had a very full day, and I'm tired."

"We'll cut it as short as possible."

I hung up and stuck a cigarette in my mouth. There was one to think over. Something had cooled her off, and for a dame who'd been as hot as Roberts said, it would take more than time to do that. So I hopped a cab, just to make it faster—in case.

It was a big white Georgian house with four columns on the front porch and a driveway that started with a wrought iron gate. The gate was locked. I told the cabbie to wait and I prowled around until I found a smaller gate that wasn't locked. The cement path curved parallel to the driveway and was bordered on the other side by tall, thick evergreens, in which this guy must have been hiding. I don't know. I never saw him. I was grinding up the slope when he got me on the back of the neck.

. . . When I opened my eyes again, my nose was buried in the gravel of the driveway, and it didn't feel like something I'd do much breathing out of for the next week. I got up slowly and stumbled toward the house like a man wading through heavy surf. I walked head-on into a car parked before the porch. I crawled up the steps on my hands and knees. I don't know how I got to my feet to ring the bell, but when the butler opened the door I was upright enough to fall into what would have been his stomach if he hadn't jumped back. I hit the floor and went out again. The guy who sapped me must have been trying to knock my head

off. Nobody will ever come any closer.

THIS time I woke up on a sofa in the living room. The butler was doing something to my head with a cool cloth, and after awhile I could make out his face. Behind him was another face that turned out to be Mrs. deGroot. When it came right into focus, I didn't like it. She looked tough and resentful in that snooty way that makes waiters jump.

"Well, Mr. Keogh," she said, "what happened to you?" She sounded as if she wished she'd done it herself.

I liked her even less. "Some of your playmates didn't want us to get together," I said flatly.

Her chin went up and she flared her nostrils at me.

"As soon as you're able to go," she snapped, "please do."

A heavy, familiar voice broke in. "Tip me the word, lady, and I'll throw him out on his can. I owe him better than that anyway."

Tom Gilman heaved himself out of a chair at the head of the sofa and came around and stood by the butler, scowling down at me.

"Lucky the lady had an idea you were a phony," he went on, "So she called me at headquarters. Me, I can't wait to hear your proposition—if you still got one." He gave me a long, thin grin, like a dog looking at a pork chop. "Let's have it, pal."

I looked at Mrs. deGroot. "How long has this hooligan been here? Or did he come after I did?" I asked.

She knitted her brow as if she didn't understand that one. "He was here when your taxi—I imagine it was your taxi—drove up. We could see the lights from the window." She indicated the windows at the end of the room with a thin, pointed hand.

Gilman's grin got longer. "You got

me wrong, buddy," he said softly. "Just one little crack on the noggin ain't going to satisfy me. I'm saving it for the time we can really have a party, just you and me in a little room down at headquarters where we can go round and round. Give out with that little proposition, then we can get going."

I pushed myself upright on the sofa. The room rocked and the three of them swam to and fro like goldfish, but I gritted my teeth and hung on. A hand came out with a glass in it, and it was brandy.

I returned Gilman's grin and mine had just as many teeth in it.

"You chump," I said. "She was braced before I even got here. When I called her up she was cold enough to put in your drink. She's been dickering with Skinny or Marr, and now she's afraid I'll kick a hole in her caper. If you didn't put this knot on my head, where the hell *did* I get it—through the mail? You were sitting there so full of being a poisoned fink you didn't think to run out and grab yourself a handful of the guy who maybe had the manuscripts. His clipping me was only incidental. He didn't even know I was coming, so what do you think he's here for—to cut the lawn?"

HIS glance slowly left my face and hung on her's as if it had hooks in it. Her mouth swung a little open and her lips were white and tight across her teeth.

"I've dickered with no one," she said thickly.

"Not even this punk here?" Gilman demanded, pointing a thick, dirty finger at me.

"No one," she repeated, "No one."

"And you'd better think twice before you do!" I didn't mind sticking it into a dame like that and maybe twisting it. "Marr was never tried for the

murder of your husband, and if he has the manuscript, it'll tie him up like a laundry bag. And if you dicker with him, it'll tie you up as an accessory. Tell her, Gilman."

"Yeah," he mumbled, "Sure."

"And furthermore, Mrs. deGroot," I went on, "when you deal with mugs like Marr, you stand a helluva good chance of getting crossed up in the end. Maybe he doesn't have the manuscript. He proved an alibi for the night of the theft, didn't he? Suppose it was on the level and he's out to take advantage of your double interest. He'll take your ten grand and leave you a bundle of yesterdays funny sheets. Let the police and the insurance company handle it, and at least you won't be kicking out your dough for a ride on the merry-go-round. Right, Gilman?"

He wanted to agree the way a dog wants to give away a bone. He gave one short nod and growled something that might have been yeah, but it could have been anything, including the unprintable.

I stood up and it wasn't so bad. I looked into her pinched face, and it didn't look so tough anymore, only sick. "I came to check up," I told her. "Roberts said you were offering ten thousand. Is that still in?"

"I'm not offering anything," she said quickly. "The Society has done that. You'll have to talk to Walter Evans about it."

I turned and steered myself at the door. I made it without knocking over any chairs or failing over the rug, even if it did feel like walking through a sand pit.

I turned in the doorway, and just to rub it in, said, "Where can I find Evans, Mrs. deGroot?" I didn't need it.

She looked at Gilman and ran a quick, nervous tongue over her thin lips. "The Chambers Building. Market Street."

"Thanks. Good night Mrs. deGroot. Good night, Mr. Gilman."

He stood there with his jaw hanging like a torn pocket. He wagged it a couple times and finally got out, "Hey!" but it didn't sound convincing.

"Good night," I said again, and let myself out.

I EXPECTED him on my neck the minute I hit the driveway in the dark beyond the houselight, so I stayed in the gravel where I could hear him coming. I may be built like a punching bag, but I was surer than hell getting sick of being used as one. The next guy who tackled me was going to get everything an eight-hour grudge could dish out. But nothing happened and I let myself out through the same little iron gate.

Still nothing happened, but this time it wasn't good. My cab was gone. Even in Livingston, cabbies don't run off without their ducats just because they get bored waiting. That luxury is reserved solely for the blondes I sometimes go bouncing with. I didn't have to stop and think that one out, even if my brains were a little shirred. Someone was very interested in having me on foot on Mt. Pleasant Avenue, and at midnight.

After my beautiful exit, I wasn't going back to ask Tom Gilman for a lift back into town, even if I had been punchy enough to ride with him.

Of course, I could walk to Livingston Center and pray for a phone, but Livingston is a town where they have a time lock on, like a safe, and they set it at eleven P.M. So I set off toward West Orange, keeping in the shadows at the side of the road, just in case somebody had the bright idea of coming up behind me with a car and leaving another case of hit-and-run for the local law to wring its hands over.

You get all kinds of cute ideas walking alone in the dead of night. I had another one. The guy that sapped me thought I was dead—he'd swung hard enough—and took the easy way of getting rid of a cabbie who might get nosy and raise the law before he was ready for it. I didn't like that one. I didn't like any of them.

In the middle of a dark stretch that looked like a cave, with the trees intertwining overhead and the next light about five hundred feet ahead, I heard another car coming up behind me, but this one sounded different. It started to slow down the minute the headlights picked me out. I jumped for a tree and got a nice thick trunk between me and it. It stopped and someone laughed—a girl. The dash light fired her red hair and picked high-lights on her cheeks.

"Peek-a-boo," she laughed. "What are you doing in there—bird walking?"

I came out slowly. I held my gun in my coat pocket, because if it was an honest lift I didn't want to scare it away, and if it wasn't, I was going to have my say.

"I'm a boy scout," I said. "I'm working for a merit badge."

"Want a lift? Or is that against the rules?"

"It's okay with me. The birds are all asleep anyway."

I walked over to the car, but before I got in, I reached over the deck and yanked at the handle that opened the rumble. It was locked. No chances for Keogh. She laughed again.

"You don't have to ride in there, Scoutmaster. You can sit up front, and if it'll make you happy, I'll warble like a thrush. Or, with my hair, I'd better make it a cardinal."

I CLIMBED in beside her and we rolled. Her dress pulled up over

her knees as she kicked the pedals, and they were as nice a pair of gams that ever stepped out of an ad, and it gave me ideas about this and that.

"The next time," I told her, "you might not be so lucky."

"Lucky?"

"Yeah, lucky. It so happens all I want is to go to Newark. The next guy might want more."

Her laughter pealed out like bells on New Years Eve. "And did you take a merit badge in that, too?" she giggled. "Oh, Scoutmaster!"

"Keep it in mind."

"I will, but I don't believe in luck. For instance, here you are, and if I had waited around for luck, you'd have been in your cab somewhere down around East Orange by this time. That wasn't luck, Scoutmaster."

I said, "Hell! So we're on the merry-go-round again. What's this getting you?"

She smiled and kept both hands on the wheel. She was wearing buckskin driving gloves. "I just wanted to find out what memory course you took. You just can't seem to forget. It's wonderful. But you know, Scoutmaster, some people mean what they say when they say it's off."

I grinned sourly. "I'm old-fashioned. I don't believe in the telephone. I don't think it will ever replace the horse. And speaking of horses, I don't think this kind of horsing around is getting us anyplace."

"You're really very funny!" She laughed again, maybe from high spirits, or maybe to show me how funny I was. "You don't even know the score—and that's very apropos: score. That's what it's all about, isn't it? You're just running around like a chicken that's forgotten where her nest is, only you never *knew* where it was."

"Let's both be funny," I said. "Your

dicker with deGroot is out. I've just spent a half hour scaring the pants off her. The minute Marr turns the manuscripts over to her, he's practically under indictment for murder. She may be art-happy, but she's not slap-happy. She likes the way she smells now. She doesn't want to stink, and that's what would happen to any dame that dickers with her husband's murderer for a couple sheets of music, no matter who wrote them by hand."

"Wrong again," she said pleasantly, keeping her eyes on the road. We were looping into West Orange.

"Nuts," I said. "You've got a proposition to make, so go ahead and make it. Even I get tired of talking after awhile."

"Five thousand for doing nothing. That's for you."

"Sure. And you'll give me a note for it until you collect. Hell, I've got plenty of paper in the place I could put your note."

"Cash. Tomorrow."

"So the deal goes through tomorrow?"

"Whether it goes through or not, you'll get yours. You can spoil it by sticking your nose in, but," she sounded amused, "you'll never find the manuscripts, not where they are—so what would it get you—to coin a phrase. That's the proposition. Five thousand for nothing or . . . nothing."

"Nuts," I said.

"You mean no?" This was pure surprise. She took her eyes from the road for a minute and gave me a stare that came right out of her childhood. It's too bad she couldn't have sounded the way she looked.

"That's right, sister. When I start going crooked, I won't do it just on the side. I'll make a life work of it. I ought to be a success; I get plenty of pointers."

She turned her face straight ahead and said sadly, "Still a Scoutmaster."

SHE suddenly twisted the wheel and swooped to the side of the road—the wrong side. She stopped and I was dumb enough to think it was to let me out.

I started to say, "You can tell . . ." when something crackled in the dried leaves on the sidewalk. He came from behind a tree and stood there, half in the glare of the headlights, but not enough to blind him. He was short and squat like me. In his hand he held a newspaper, and I didn't have to be a Quiz Kid to know what he had under it.

"Here's where you get out, Keogh," he said in a husky voice. It was the same voice that had called me on the phone that afternoon. "Just move nice and easy."

"I had an invitation from your skinny pal this afternoon. Why should I move?"

"That wasn't an invitation, bud. He was just having a bad dream and talked in his sleep. You shouldn't have taken that kind of stuff serious. Move!"

I nudged the girl in the side with the gun I still had in my pocket, "Tell him how it's going to feel trying to eat breakfast next week with half a gut."

She stiffened. "He's got a gun on me, Paulie," she said.

He gave her that kind of crooked grin you get when only half of it is going to be funny.

"Now, that's too bad," he said. "I get him and he gets you. Who the hell am I going to divide all that dough with?"

She screamed something she didn't get from Webster's and pointed her arm at him. At the end of the arm was a gun. It jumped twice. He jerked his head to one side and took three short steps toward the car. He went to his

knees in a cautious kind of way, as if he were looking for a four-leaf clover, then rolled over on his side. I could see the blood seeping from under the hand on which his head lay and staining the leaves.

Her hands went to her mouth and she gasped, "Oh!" She threw the gun on the floor. She was through the door in a flash and disappeared into the high shrubbery around the house in front of which we had stopped.

SOMEWHERE, I heard a window go up. A woman began to scream. I shoved the car into gear and got away from there, but fast. I didn't want to waste time tangling with strange cops right then.

I cut over to Park Avenue until I hit Munn, then swung right and stayed with it to Central and swung left on Central. I slewed south on Oraton Parkway. There was still nothing behind me.

It wasn't until I was almost on it, that I remembered Tom Gilman had a house on Oraton in the Vailsburg district. Maybe we weren't speaking and all that, but at least I knew him.

The house was full of noise and light when I stopped in front of the door. The piano was jangling away like a cement mixer and a lot of people were singing something that could have been "I'm Alone Because I Love you." It sounded like a construction job.

Tom opened the door and when he saw me, his face went scowl-heavy and he growled, "What the hell do you want?"

I said, "Forget I'm on the crap list for a minute. I've got something for you, but it has to be done fast."

He looked at me hard for a minute, then said shortly, "Come in."

The door led us right into the living room, and there were about thirty peo-

ple climbing on one another's backs around the piano, before which sat Ginger LaRue Gilman herself, working her arms up and down like a pair of trip hammers. She hadn't taken any lessons since last I heard her in Minsky's. She had on a low-cut dress that showed too much of everything, but maybe that was because she had too much of everything.

"We can't talk here," I shouted at Tom.

He jerked his head at the stairway, and we made it through the crowd like a couple St. Bernards going over the Alps. We went into a bedroom, stacked high with coats and hats, and he closed the door.

"It's cracked right in half," I told him before he could get his big mouth open.

I gave him everything that had happened since I left Livingston, and when I came to the end, I said, "The guy laying dead up there in West Orange is Paulie Marr. I know, and you know, he dickered tonight with the deGroot dame before I got to her, and with a little pressure, she'll spill her guts, and you'll be in the wrong seat. With one shot you pick up the loose end on the old deGroot murder, you scoop in a little nice publicity for smart snooping, and your brother-in-law, Lew Bergner, can sleep nights, not having to worry what's going to happen to the guy who shot out his throat. We can get the jury later. I came to you because the local law up there, not knowing the background, might horse around for hours and we'll lose the manuscripts."

He grabbed up a hat from the bed. It happened to fit him.

"Come on, boy," he said.

This time we went through the crowd like a Panzer unit. We were half way back to West Orange before the prowler car picked us up. It shot across our

nose and damned near buried us in the curb. Tom climbed out, cursing, and maybe spoiled all the fun the cops had been planning. Another prowler car tagged us in West Orange. It was quite a parade. We followed it right to headquarters. Two detectives came over and stuck out their jaws at us until Gilman flashed his buzzer. Then we started a nice quiet conversation.

EVERYTHING was fine, right to the end where I had Marr stretched out on the sidewalk. One of the W.O. dicks lifted his hat and scratched his head.

"A stiff?" he said, "We didn't find any stiff. We got a couple calls about some shooting and a description of the car with tag numbers, so we put it on the air, just to find out what the hell. No stuff."

I began to get a funny feeling. "There's got to be a stiff," I said. "I saw him take two in the head and go down. The jury scrambled before I could put the arm on her. Maybe he crawled into the bushes."

"Could be," he said doubtfully. "We'll go back for a look."

They got in the prowler car and we followed them back to the spot. There wasn't any body. The blood was clear enough on the leaves, but it didn't go anywhere, the way it would if he had crawled. We beat the bushes anyway, and all we got were mosquitos. Gilman's face was dark, and I didn't have to hear his mubbling to know what he was saying.

One of the prowlers said something to the dick, and he lifted his head and gave me a narrow look.

"The boys tell me," he said, "they got here five minutes after the shooting. Even if the guy was only nicked, he still would have stayed down long enough to be spotted."

Gilman looked from his face to mine and snarled, "Say, what the hell's going on here?"

"I gave it to you straight." The feeling had stopped being funny. "There's the gun she used, still on the floor—if that proves anything."

"It don't."

The dick reached in and plucked the gun from the car. It was a little .25 with a pearl handle. It had been fired twice. He looked up and shrugged. He wrapped it in his handkerchief. He looked at the car, then reached out and gave the rumble handle a tug.

"What's in there?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said sourly. "I didn't buy the car yet. And I don't think I will. I don't like the company it kept."

He took the keys from the ignition and unlocked the deck. He climbed up on the fender and swung it open.

"Let's have a light," he said.

One of the prowlies came over with a flash and we all looked in.

We had found our body.

But it was the wrong one!

On the floor of the rumble, curled up like a foetus, was Skinny. There was enough of his face left to be able to tell, the rest looked as if an onion grater had been used on it. It wasn't just a simple kill. The guy who gave it to him wanted him to feel it. He was just about twice as dead as any guy I'd ever seen.

Gilman leaned his two hands on the fender and peered long at the body.

"That's the guy you were talking to yesterday afternoon down in Charley's," he said. Then he snapped, "Wasn't it?"

This had caught me flatfooted. I just stood there and gaped at him.

HE PUSHED himself away from the roadster and stood in front of me, his face working like Dempsey's used to

before the bell.

"I've taken a lot from you today, Keogh, but this is the best. This tops everything. What was I pulled into this for anyway—an alibi? Sure, I'm just a big dumb slob. I know it. But I don't like it rubbed in."

I saw it coming and I tried to jump back, which was a mistake because his arm was long enough to reach me, even going away. It got me in the belly. He brought up another one and slammed me on the forehead, which was a dumb play. A head is always harder than a knuckle. I didn't have to, but I went down and stayed there. There was enough law there to put me in six hospitals if I tangled with him.

He held his hand and said to the dick, "I wish I could be in on your party." Still holding his hand, we went over to the prowler car that had first picked us up. He said something to the boys, then climbed in. They drove away.

One of the cops walked toward me, but I was up before he could jerk me up. I didn't want an arm pulled out of its socket.

"Can't you guys smell a frame, even when it's as crude as this?" I growled.

They didn't even look at me. They said to the prowler, "Take him in." They turned to climb into the roadster.

I scooped up a handful of the bloody leaves and shoved it out at them. "And take this in, too," I said harshly. "If it's a frame, the guy I saw go down didn't bleed. I want to find out what blood this is. I say it's dog."

That got them, for a minute anyway. They stopped and looked at the leaves in my hand.

"And the guy in the back," I snapped, "how long has he been dead?"

"Not having bumped him, I wouldn't know."

"He wasn't bumped while I was in

the car, and I can account for my time before that. Hell, this frame wasn't even meant to stick. They just wanted to slow me down, so they'd have time to close their dicker tomorrow, and once it's closed they'll see you in St. Louis, Louis, and out Marr goes. Gilman's too dumb to see it that way, but my God, it sticks out like a bustle."

They looked at one another, and the one who had done all the taking said finally, "Climb in." I got in between them in the roadster and we went back to headquarters, I with my little pile of leaves cuddled in my lap.

"It's not the rap I'm worrying about," I said as we walked in, "it's the time. Even if I get out of here at noon tomorrow, it's too late. That's what those mugs were aiming at."

The dick pushed me into a chair with one hand and said, "Save it, bud." He scooped up the phone and after a lot of conversation got a doctor who was willing to come down and look at the stiff at that hour. When he showed, they left me with the bored desk sergeant and the three of them went outside to the roadster.

The wheels in the clock were going round and round, and outside the sky in the east showed a line like a crack under a door. By this time I had my fingernails down to the first knuckle.

The dick came back and saved me from further mutilation.

"About four this afternoon—yesterday afternoon," he corrected himself, "An hour either way."

"That's easy. Until about four I was with Gilman in Charley's on Market Street. Another dick—Ben Shapiro—was right beside me, too. Then Roberts, Alliance Assurance Company. Know him?"

"I know somebody who should."

He went out again. The next time they came back they were ready to let

me go.

"We couldn't get Gilman," he said, "but Shapiro gave you a clean bill from two to four. Nice guy, Shapiro. Roberts took you up to five. In case you're interested, the guy in the rumble had a broken neck, but he was sure worked over, from top to bottom. And it's a funny thing about that gun. It was filled with blanks. The doc says if you'll hang around for an hour or two, he'll tell you if the blood on the leaves was poodle or airedale."

I wiped my face with my handkerchief, and not because it was warm. "Send me a letter," I said.

THE desk phone rang, and the sergeant sleepily grumbled, "Police Headquarters," then silently held it out to the dick, who said, "Yup?" and listened. He put his hand over the mouthpiece and said, "Gilman." Then into the phone, "He's clean. We're turning him loose." The earpiece started to crackle. He held it away from him and looked at it. He winked at me. "Okay," he said, and hung up.

"If I were you," he said, "I wouldn't take him for any midnight rides for awhile yet. He's kind of upset. At that," he rubbed his chin, "guess maybe I'd be too. Let me know how it comes out."

I promised and we all shook hands, but I couldn't help thinking what those hands might have been doing if I hadn't sent my tongue clacking down the track like the Twentieth Century going through Hohokus.

I grabbed a bus on Main Street, then took a cab from Newark to my apartment on Mt. Prospect.

I STUMBLED, dead tired, into the living room with my eyes half closed—but not so closed I couldn't see her sitting on the sofa with a Luger aimed

at the bulge of my stomach that was closest to her.

"Good morning, Scoutmaster," she said brightly.

"Have you got one that will work this time?" I asked.

Marr came in from the kitchen with a tray of cereal, toast and coffee. He gave me a careless glance and set the tray on the coffee table in front of the sofa. I didn't see any wounds or bandages on him. He straightened up and wrinkled his nose, as if he didn't like the smell.

"So now you turn up," he said.

He came over, being careful not to get between her and me, and reaching under my coat, lifted my .38 Special. He shucked out the pills and slipped them into his pocket. He tossed the gun under the sofa.

"We figured," said the girl cheerily, "that if you didn't need the apartment, you wouldn't mind our using it. But if you did come, we thought it would be so nice if we welcomed you home. You'd better put your hands up."

I put them up.

"Higher," snapped Marr.

I stretched.

"Now back against that wall," he ordered. He certainly didn't talk much. He had a pursed up, introspective face.

I backed up. He took a gun from his pocket and casually started to screw on a silencer. I began to sweat.

"Why that?" I said. I could feel my face twitch.

"You're too nosy and you won't stay put."

My mouth suddenly felt hot and dry. I looked at the girl. She was white and the gun in her hand had developed a tremor.

"Do you always hang around and watch while he does it?" I asked her.

She got up and started unsteadily toward the kitchen. He watched her with

a lopsided grin.

"She'll never get used to it," he said.

"She—"

There was a noise outside, and the door swung in with Gilman behind it. Marr swung the gun on him. Gilman grunted and reached for his back pocket.

"Hold it," said Marr.

"So we come to another double-cross," snarled Gilman. "This adds up to three."

But his hand kept going. He sure was a brave guy, even if he didn't have any brains. He just stood there, as wide as the port side of the Queen Mary and tugged at his gun. Marr's lips twitched and his knuckle whitened as he bore down on the trigger.

"I found out where they were," he said. His voice trembled, but not because he was scared. He had made up his mind to shoot.

Gilman's eyes went wide. "Like hell!" he said.

The girl cried, "Paul!"

She jumped for him as Marr's gun spat, and Gilman went back heavily against the open door. His gun bayed. I dived for the arm chair. Marr crashed against it and flopped to the floor like a pillow. His gun clattered at my feet and I snatched it up as Gilman's gun bayed again. The girl shrieked, and I heard two thuds—one as she hit the coffee table, and one as she hit the floor.

I stood up and said, "Whew! That was too close!"

GILMAN'S grin got wider and thinner. He braced himself against the door and brought his gun painfully around on me. I yapped and went down behind the chair as again it roared. The stuffing jumped out of the chair an inch above my head.

I threw one over the arm of the chair and heard him grunt. The heavy roar of his gun sounded again, and the

plaster sprayed from the wall about six feet up. I stood and pumped another one into him. I would have given him everything it had, but the damn thing jammed. It didn't mean anything, anyway. He swayed and his face went blank. The gun wilted in his hand. He tried to hold the grin on his face, but it had turned into a grimace of inutterable agony. He clawed with both hands at his chest.

"Oh no!" he cried.

Something prickled behind my eyes. He spun around and walked into the wall. He clutched the door as he slid down. He rolled over and was still.

"He did it," said a thick voice from the doorway.

I looked up. It was Ben Shapiro. He came in and knelt beside Gilman. He felt his temple and probed for the jugular. He grimaced and stood.

"There I was, Keogh," he said, "and I swear I couldn't have got my gun out if I tried for a month. Holy cow! Whose party was it?"

I DROPPED on the arm of the chair and lit a cigarette.

"Marr and Gilman," I said wearily. "I've been so busy running after my own tail I didn't see it, and it was in front of my nose all the time. It started when Tom took Marr for the deGroot job. If you remember, Marr had an alibi. Gilman rigged it for him, and the price was the Beethoven manuscripts. Tom had them, but he had to hold them because they were hotter than a model T on an upgrade.

"So yesterday I was braced in Charley's by a skinny mug, and Gilman spotted a double-cross right away. Marr was cutting himself back for a piece of them, because from the dickers they tried to make with him in jail, he knew Tom still had them. That's the reason Tom put on that sparring act with me.

He was sore. So out he went.

"Sometime in the next hour he had a dicker with Marr, and Skinny got it literally in the neck. Judging from the way he got it, Gilman gave it to him. Marr would have done it with a gun.

"The next funny thing is up in deGroot's in Livingston. On the way in I was sapped by Marr, who was waiting on the grounds. Not for me. He couldn't have known I was coming. Inside I found Gilman. He gave me the song that the deGroot had called him in because she wanted some law around when I made my proposition. I was still going around because of that crack on the back of the neck and I didn't see through it. But why the hell should she call in a Newark dick? She lives in Livingston. They've got plenty of law up there, from what I hear.

"Then later, when they found Skinny all wrapped up in a roadster I picked up from Marr's judy, Tom said:

"That's the guy you were talking to in Charley's.' But how the hell would he know? He didn't see him. The guy was hiding behind the juke box. Marr was the only one who could tell him that Skinny was the one who braced me. And something scared Skinny off in Charley's. And what was it? He saw Tom at the bar.

"The last straw was when I walked in here this morning and found Marr and his judy in possession. How did they know I lived here? I just moved in the day before yesterday. You and Tom knew, because I was chewing the fat about it in Charley's to him. Again it had to be Tom, because you didn't figure in this at all.

"But, Ben, right to the last minute before Tom tried to put it to me, I didn't see it. Then when he took that shot at me, it opened up like a wedding night.

"So that's the way it stands. I have

a fair idea where the manuscripts are, but brother, pray that I'm right!"

He said, "Holy cow!" He looked at the bodies and said slowly, "Me, I come up to tell you to lay off for a while because Tom's on the prod."

We left when headquarters took over, and Ben drove me over to Gilman's place on Oraton Parkway. Ginger La-Rue, herself, all blowsy and bulging in an old kimono, let us in with a smile that might have got the boys in the balcony back in Minsky's when there was less gold in it.

"Well, well, well," she burred, "there's nothing like company in the morning, is there!" She wriggled a little for us. If we had clapped, she probably would have shucked off the kimono.

"We'd like to see your music, Mrs. Gilman," said Shapiro.

She wanted to sit right down and play for us, but I said let's pick out our

favorites first and took the stack of sheet music from the top of the piano. We went through it leaf by leaf, and when we were done, we looked at one another.

"Is this all?" we said.

"Oh no. There's some old trash in the piano bench, but I don't play that real good. Not my style." Another wriggle.

We reached for the piano bench together.

It was all there, under a heap of stuff like *Maiden's Prayer* and *Hearts and Flowers*. Ben stared at it.

"And this was what all the shooting was for?" he said. "This guy Beethoven must be pretty hot stuff. What does he sound like?"

"Damned if I know," I told him, "except he wrote the V-For-Victory song — da-da-da-dum, da-da-da-dum. You've heard it."

HISTORY OF THE DEATH PENALTY

SAVAGES first sought to eliminate the unfit in their tribes by killing them. The deformed, crippled, insane, aged, and any others who hampered the tribe in its activities were publicly executed. As mankind progressed from savagery through barbarism into the early stages of civilization, this application of the death penalty was eventually abandoned.

The practice of killing the killer developed as a result of religious superstitions which assumed that the spirit of the victim could not leave his body until the murder was avenged. There is no reference to the death penalty for murder in the earlier books of the Bible. Cain, although he killed his brother under conditions for which he would have been convicted for murder and executed today, was merely branded with a sign on his forehead. Later, during the Mosaic period, the practice of "a life for a life," borrowed from barbaric neighbors, was adopted. Even then certain places were recognized as "Cities of Refuge" to which the murderer might flee and remain in safety.

In Greece the killer was exiled, but this could be avoided by making a settlement with the deceased's relations; a practice that spread throughout Europe. The settlement was called "blood money." The Athenians applied the death penalty to social and moral offenders such as the philosopher Socrates was adjudged to be; the Spartans

applied it only to slaves. In Rome capital punishment was abolished in 453 B.C.

It was in England during the latter part of the eighteenth century and the first part of the nineteenth that the infliction of the death penalty reached its climax. At one time during this period 240 different offenses, from catching fish in a private pond to murder, were punishable by death. In the reign of Henry VIII, 72,000 people, (at least six a day) lost their lives on the gallows or the block.

These strict measures had very little effect on the prevention of crime in England. It is a matter of record that the first counterfeit note on the Bank of England was presented a few days after forgery was made a capital crime. Pickpockets plied their trade in crowds gathered around the gallows in attendance at the hanging of a fellow pickpocket.

In the United States the death penalty was at one time prescribed for over 100 different offenses. Gradually, however, the capital offenses have been reduced or abolished altogether. In fact, it is absolutely mandatory for murder in the first degree in only five states at the present time—Connecticut, Massachusetts, North Carolina, New Mexico, and Vermont. It can be applied as punishment for arson, burglary, kidnapping, rape, robbery, train-wrecking, and treason.

—Pete Boggs.



**OVER and over in his mind
the phrase ran: "you'll never get home,
you'll never get home"—that is, as a living man!**

The Sound of Death

By David Wright O'Brien

ALL THE way the wheels of the train had clicked rhythmically, incessantly, "You'll never get home . . . you'll never get home . . . you'll never get home." And yet, here we were, rolling into the big, smudgy depot that meant Chicago. And this was home.

Africa was very far away. Tunis

and the smell of death. The white anti-septic hospitals and the smiling nurses. But the sound of death was near. The sound of death was in my ears and deep in my mind and I wondered if I'd ever lose it completely.

There was a taxi,
and the spoken
name of a



The kid took to his heels,
and the cop took out after
him with his gun drawn

familiar hotel, and Michigan Boulevard, and the sparkling clean parks with bright lawns and the lake beyond.

There was sleep, a shower, privacy, the freedom of a hotel room where no one watched and no one cared what you did. A few drinks.

And then the grim business to be started, with the sound of death coming again to my ears, even in the crowded Loop. A familiar building, a familiar room. A girl behind a counter. A smile. Then the big, ledger-like volume that contained half a month's history of a city, indexed in the pages of the back-issue newspapers it held.

I took the back-copy file to a quiet corner.

"April 1st to 15th," it said on the cover.

Pages turned. Scanning. Then the issue. The one I'd wanted to see. The story, page 3, April 6th.

YOUTHFUL BANDIT SLAIN FLEEING STORE HOLD-UP

The body of a young gunman, slain in a west side alley, late last night, while fleeing the scene of a grocery store robbery, was today identified as Thomas Christopher, 18, of the Buena Vera Apartments, 3443 West Norg Street.

Young Christopher, brother of a former prominent city attorney now serving in the armed forces overseas, was shot by Police Officer Henry Boyko, when the latter was summoned to the scene of the robbery by cries from the owner of the victimized shop.

Officer Boyko saw the youth dashing across the street as the storekeeper stood in his doorway shouting and gesticulating. He drew his gun, pursuing the young bandit into a nearby alley. When the youth refused to heed the policeman's commands to halt, Boyko fired four times, the last two shots felling Christopher.

George Propupolus, owner of the store at 2467 Marlin Avenue, said the youth entered the shop as it was closing. He drew a gun and . . .

I read the news story half a dozen times, and by then I was sure I had the details—as they'd been recounted—thoroughly memorized.

Shutting the big file book of back-issue newspapers, I took it over to the

girl at the counter.

She smiled. "Find what you wanted?"

"Yes. Thanks."

I turned away from the counter and almost ran headlong into a dapper, handsome, swarthy little guy in a pearl gray fedora.

"Well I'm damned. Christopher—Johnny Christopher!" the natty little guy exclaimed.

IT TOOK half an instant for me to get him into focus, then I was able to say: "Hello, Nick. How are you?"

Nick Alex had grabbed my hand and was pumping my arm up and down like a slot machine handle.

"Brother," he said, "you look like a million bucks. When did you blow into town?"

Alex had very white, very even teeth. They made a beautiful smile against his olive skin. I told him I'd gotten into town the night before.

"Where you staying?" he demanded.

I gave him the name of my hotel.

"Look, why don't you shed that flea house? We got room at my place. We'd sure as hell like to have you stay a while with us."

"Thanks," I said. "But I couldn't, Nick."

He looked tremendously disappointed, but I knew he was relieved. He kept grinning and shaking his head in a polite facsimile of happy surprise. Then his expression sobered to sincere concern.

"You had it rough, eh Johnny?"

"Not as rough as a lot of other guys," I said. "The ones who didn't come back."

"Long in the hospital?"

"Pretty long," I said. "Had to learn how to use my new leg."

He looked even more soberly concerned. "I heard about that. Too

damn bad. Could have been worse, though. And you're back, for good."

"Yeah," I said. "I'm back."

"Look," said Alex, "you come out to the house, huh? The missus will fix you a big spread. My address is still the same. You give me a ring anytime, see?"

"Sure," I said. "I'll do that. Still in the same business?"

Nick Alex smiled his white, handsome smile.

"Believe it or not, Johnny, I'm strictly legit now."

"Say that slowly," I said.

"No fooling," Alex protested. "Oh, I still have a few of the books, and a couple of gambling clubs out in the suburbs. But otherwise I'm clean. Politics is my speed, now."

"You always had a hand in politics," I said, "when it was to your advantage."

"But not in the open, like now," he said. "I'm even thinking of running for state senator next primary," he added proudly. "But to hell with that. What about you? What're your plans? Going back into the shyster business?"

I shrugged. "I don't know yet," I said. "I have to look around. I have to get adjusted."

Nick Alex nodded vigorously. "Sure, sure. See what you mean." He glanced at his watch. "Say, Johnny. Excuse me. I'm in a rush. You remember that invite out to the house, huh? Call me, anytime."

"Sure," I said, "you count on it."

We both smiled, and he moved away, each of us knowing neither meant the words and actions we'd gone through. I watched him go out through the same door by which I'd entered five or ten minutes before.

I walked over to the big counter where a girl was getting out the big, bound, back-issue volumes of papers for people.

I caught her attention.

"That gentleman who just left," I began.

She looked surprised.

"Could you tell me what back-issue file he was looking through?"

She looked doubtful, then suspicious.

"Really," she began, "I—uh—"

"It's very important," I said earnestly. And surprisingly enough, that did it.

She pointed to a bound file copy lying at the far end of the counter on the right.

"He was looking through that one," she said quickly. Then she moved off, as if washing her hands of any further complication with the matter.

I went down to the end of the counter and glanced at the file copy. It was closed, so I couldn't tell what particular copy he'd been scanning, or what page. But it was for the same half month period as the back-issue book I'd been paging through, April 1st to 15th.

A glance at my watch told me I'd best be getting on. I'd found out all I needed from this source, and there were other rounds to make.

I went out through the door Alex had used as an exit. He wasn't in sight by the time I'd reached the street. A cab pulled up at the curb to let out passengers, and I went over to it and piled in.

I gave the driver my address and sat back, lighting a cigarette.

There was a funny tingling in my spine, and I sat there wondering what it was going to be like to see home again. . . .

CHAPTER II

I WENT up the steps of the tired old brownstone two-flat and pushed the buzzer on the doorbell to the right. While I was waiting I stared at the name scrawled in the card beneath the

bell of the other door. It seemed funny to see a different name beneath that bell.

Then the door on the right opened, and I heard Mrs. Spiros say:

"Hello, what do you—"

She saw me, then, and recognition lopped her sentence off in the middle. She gasped sharply.

"Hello, Mrs. Spiros," I said.

"Why, why it's Johnny — Johnny Christopher!" she exclaimed. She sounded as pleased as she was surprised, and I wondered if she really was. "Come in, come in right away, Johnny," she said.

In the living room I took a seat on a comfortable horsehair sofa and stared at Mrs. Spiros. She didn't seem changed much. Maybe a little older, maybe a little more tired—just a little bit more of everything she'd been before.

She had a towel wrapped around her gray hair. She'd just washed it. A big quilted housecoat was wrapped comfortably around her expansive bulk, and her bare feet had been hastily shoved into blue slippers that were considerably frayed.

I could smell spaghetti cooking in the kitchen, and the sunlight was warm as it filtered through the worn lace curtains. Everything was suddenly familiar again.

Mrs. Spiros took a seat in an over stuffed armchair across from me and said:

"Tell me everything, Johnny. Tell me when you got into town and how you feel now, and what you plan on doing."

I smiled a little.

"I just got in this morning," I told her. "I'm staying at a hotel down in the Loop. I'm feeling pretty good. I don't exactly know what I'm going to do, yet."

"You look just swell, Johnny," Mrs.

Spiros lied. "You look better than when you went away. How long were you in the hospital, or would you rather not talk about that?"

"I don't mind talking about it," I said. "I was in the hospital about a year. Ten months in the army in the States, six months in action, and about a year in the hospital. Guess I've been away some time." Then I hesitated a minute, before saying what I'd come to say. I guess she saw what was coming, for her expression changed.

"Look," I blurted, "I want to find out about my Mother. Did she have everything she needed, all the attention, good doctors? Was she comfortable when she died?"

Mrs. Spiros wasn't happy discussing it. I could see that in her eyes. But she was telling the truth.

"She had everything she needed, Johnny," she said. "There was nothing that could be done that wasn't done. I don't think she suffered a great deal. She died three days after the truck hit her. Your brother Tommy was with her all the time—but you know that, I suppose."

"I don't know much about it at all, Mrs. Spiros," I said. "You see, I wasn't notified of it when it happened. They'd just brought me back to the states, to the hospital. I guess they figured that I wasn't in shape to take news like that at the time. They didn't tell me until almost four months later. I was able to read letters, then, and wondered why I wasn't hearing from Mom or Tommy."

Mrs. Spiros looked shocked.

"I—I didn't know that, Johnny. And about Tommy, well, I hope you don't think that—I mean, he was a good boy."

"Yes," I said. "He was a good kid. A little too bright, maybe, but he was a good kid. He was killed three months

after Mom died, eh?"

Mrs. Spiros nodded. She didn't say anything. She twisted a handkerchief around in her big red-knuckled hands.

"One thing more," I said. "Tommy and Mom both had money enough, comforts enough, while I was gone?"

Mrs. Spiros nodded vigorously, as though happy to have something good to say.

"They didn't want for a thing," she said earnestly.

I FELT better, at least about that part of it. The money I'd left in the bank should have been plenty to get them by, but I'd wanted to know for sure. I stood up, a little stiffly, and Mrs. Spiros glanced sharply at my leg.

"I'm still a little awkward with it," I said, "but I'm getting better and better. At the hospital they made me learn how to dance with it. You'd be surprised how swell they are. Almost like real ones."

"You don't have to go yet, Johnny," Mrs. Spiros said.

I glanced at my watch. "I have to," I told her. "I have some things to do. I'll be back sometime and we'll have a long talk about old times."

"You must, Johnny. Promise you will."

I promised, and Mrs. Spiros showed me to the door. She was still at the door as I went down the steps. I turned and waved to her and she waved back.

When I got about four houses away, I turned and looked back at the old brownstone. I stood there a minute in the warm summer sun. I tried to remember all the years Mom and Tommy and I had lived there. A good fifteen of them. We'd moved into the place after Pop had died. It seemed centuries ago.

Down the street another block was the old drug store I'd hung around as a

kid. Almost three years had marked a change in it. The sign in front was new, and bore the name of a well-known drug chain. The front had been remodeled.

I went into the drug store and bought a pack of cigarettes and went to the rear. Beside the telephone booths I looked up Floyd Hendricks in the book. I wasn't sure that his number had changed. It had. I mentally recorded the number and stepped into the booth.

The voice that answered after I dialed Hendricks' number was probably a secretary's. At any rate it was unfamiliar. Mr. Hendricks was not in, she said. He would be back in half an hour. He was in court at the moment. Was there any message.

"No," I said. "No message. I'll call again.

CHAPTER III

I LOOKED at my watch. - It was a little after one. Hendricks' new office was in the Loop. I had time to have a drink before catching a cab downtown. I decided I'd have a Tom Collins at Dinty Kerrigan's. Kerrigan's was right next door to the old Sixtieth Ward Political Club, and Dinty might be able to give me some information.

He was polishing glasses behind the bar when I walked in. There was no one else around. He was just as fat and bald and red-faced as ever.

"Hello, Dinty," I said.

He did a double take. Then he put down his glass carefully, leaned over the bar with outstretched hand and said:

"Johnny, you old goat!"

He asked all the expected questions for a few minutes, and I gave him all the expected answers. And all the time I knew he was damned sure what I was after. When he finally got around to

mixing me a Collins, I put it to him bluntly.

"Tell me the truth about Tommy," I said. "Who killed the kid?"

Dinty's sigh was as soft as silk running against silk. He brought my drink over and put it before me. The look he gave me was sad, despairing.

"I knew that would be what you'd be after the minute you came back, Johnny."

"That's what I'm after," I said. "Who killed Tommy?"

Dinty looked even more sad. "It was in all the papers, Johnny."

"I spent all this morning reading back issues of those papers," I told him. "I know what the papers say. But what's the truth?"

"Tommy was shot in an alley just off Madison Street," he said. "A policeman named Boyko shot him. The kid was running away from the scene of a robbery."

"That's what I read in the paper, Dinty," I said flatly. "I told you I don't give a damn about the official account. Tommy wasn't a thief. He never pulled any stick-up stuff. I'm trying to get the truth."

Dinty looked embarrassed.

"I know, Johnny. I know how you feel. I was surprised as hell myself. I couldn't believe it. But the kid was identified as the stick-up operator right after the cop shot him."

I knocked off half my drink in a long swallow.

"Tommy wasn't the sort," I said.

"You didn't see him after your Mom died, Johnny," Dinty said slowly. "It did something to the kid. You were in the hospital, back from Africa. He couldn't get in touch with you—guess you were in pretty bad shape, then. Besides, he'd brooded a lot about having been turned down by all the branches of the service. He wanted into the war

so bad he could taste it, you know. But his weak ticker—"

I cut in.

"I know about his bum heart," I said. "I knew they'd never let him into the service. And I know how badly he must have felt about being left out, being only 18, and with all his pals in it. But all that, plus Mom's death, couldn't have changed the kid's character to the point where he'd go bad. That wouldn't be Tommy."

"All I know," Dinty shrugged, "is the way everybody figured it out. I don't like it any better than you, Johnny."

"What about Hendricks?" I demanded. I was getting tired of being subtle.

Dinty's eyebrows went up a notch. He picked up his bar rag, flicked it at a fly.

"What about Hendricks, Johnny?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

"I hear Tommy was working for him in the ward," I said. "I hear Hendricks gave him a small fry job in the organization shortly after Mom died."

"The boss," said Dinty, after a moment's hesitation, wanted to do the kid a favor, especially when it was obvious that he was in such a state over your mother's death and him not being able to get into the army."

I finished off the rest of my drink, put the glass down.

"Why would Hendricks want to do any relative of mine a favor?" I demanded. "Why would Hendricks want to give Tommy a job in the ward political organization when he and I never got along together before I went into the army?"

Dinty picked up my glass. "This one's on me," he said. He went over to the sink and began to fix another Collins. "You got Hendricks wrong, Johnny," he said, bringing out some confectioner's sugar. "He don't hold no

grudges. Besides, he never thought you were a bum guy. He always kinda liked you, even though you and him didn't get along in political matters."

I sighed. "Forget that drink, Dinty, I have to run along. I'm sorry that I didn't stop to think this place is owned by Hendricks—like most of the places in the ward."

Dinty put the sugar down.

"Take it easy, Johnny," he said. "It's been swell seeing you again. Drop in whenever you can, will you?"

"Sure," I said, opening the door.

"And don't forget," Dinty repeated, "take it easy, kid."

"I've gotten out of the habit, Dinty," I told him, closing the door behind me. "Way out of the habit."

CHAPTER IV

I CAUGHT a cab outside of Dinty's place, and fifteen minutes later the driver dropped me off in front of a shabby, yellow brick two-flat apartment building in one of the West Side's seedier residential sections.

In the hallway, which smelled strongly of sweat and stale cabbage, I looked at the letterbox markers, punched the bell under the one that read, "Collinski". In a few moments a thin, yellow-faced, straggly-haired little girl of about twelve opened the door.

She was chewing gum, and had a copy of a tattered screen magazine clutched in her hands.

"Whatcha want?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Does Henry Boyko live here?" I asked.

She blinked at me from deep sunken gray eyes.

"The policeman," I said. "Patrolman Boyko."

"Oh, Uncle Henry," she said.

"Does he live here?"

"He ain't a cop any more. Uncle Henry retired. He quit the force about three month ago, maybe longer. He don't live with Mom and us anymore, neither."

"Oh. Do you know where he moved?"

"He owns a house. Out in the suburbs, he does. He made a lotta money. Maw got mad he wouldn't live here no more with us when he got rich. Uppity, she says he got."

I nodded understandingly. "I don't blame your Ma," I said.

"Pa said good riddance," said the girl. "He said money or no money, he was sick of having Maw's brother living in our house."

"Is your Ma home? I asked. "I'd like to find out your Uncle Henry's new address."

"Maw ain't home. Nobody's home but me and the other kids. I'm the oldest. I'm minding the house. I kin look in Maw's dresser, though. She's gotta book with addresses in it. She's got Uncle Henry's in it. I seen her read it out to Pa, once, when he wanted to write Uncle Henry."

"That'll sure be swell," I said. "That kind of service is worth a dollar." I pulled out my wallet, removed a bill from it.

The little girl hurried off, after giving the bill a bug-eyed glance. She was back in about three minutes, holding a scrap of paper and a pencil in her hand.

"I copied it off the book," she said, handing me the scrap of paper.

I handed her the bill.

"Gee, thanks!" She said

The address of excopper Boyko, when I glanced at it out in the street a moment later, proved to be located in a fairly prosperous suburb about forty minute's drive from the city. I folded the scrap of paper and placed it carefully into my wallet. Then I started

looking around for another cab.

My watch told me that I'd be able to catch Floyd Hendricks at his office, if I got back to the Loop without any further delay. . . .

CHAPTER V

FLOYD HENDRICKS had his new offices on LaSalle Street, in one of the newest skyscrapers there. Twenty-fourth floor, ten-room suite. I entered a thick carpeted reception room done in the most modern manner, and told a Varga-girl switchboard operator my name. She bade me have a seat.

Hendricks came out of a white paneled side door less than three minutes later. He looked exactly the same as he had when I'd left. Except considerably more prosperous, considerably better tailored.

He was a short man, with unusually broad shoulders and almost no neck. His features were regular, which, for a politician, meant handsome, and he had practically no neck. He gave the same impression of hulking power that he always had.

His black, perfectly combed hair shone as brightly as his flashing smile, as he crossed the waiting room to greet me, hand extended.

"Johnny, boy. Johnny, you don't know how damned glad I am to see you."

I shook his hand briefly, looking him over more thoroughly at close range, and marveling at the success with which he held back his age. I knew that he was over fifty, still he didn't look a day older than thirty-five.

"I've been anxious to see you," I said truthfully.

He went through the patented routine. How fine I was looking, how swell it was to shake my hand and know I was home for good. All the expected

stuff done by a master politician.

"You got in this morning, eh?" he concluded.

"That's right. How did you know?"

"I've been waiting for you, Johnny," he said. I've been waiting ever since you got back from Africa. I had them let me know at the hospital the day you were released."

That caught me off balance.

"I don't get it," I began. Hendricks cut me off.

"Come on into my office. We can talk there. I'll explain everything to you, Johnny. Damn, I'm glad to see you, boy."

Hendricks' office was a smaller, equally plush edition of the ultra-modern waiting room. He waved me to a chair, seated himself behind his gleaming glass-topped desk, brought out a box of cigars. I took one, and so did he. He lighted both of them with an elaborate Ronson.

"You've got quite a layout here," I said, after a moment.

"All the good lawyers have gone into the army, Johnny." He laughed depreciatively. "I get lots of business these days."

"And I don't suppose politics has slipped any," I said.

He grinned. "Just as frank as ever, Johnny."

"I haven't lost a thing," I said wryly, "except a leg."

His expression changed to serious understanding. Clever guy, Hendricks. He knew I'd resent sympathy, so he picked just the right expression of concern.

"I know about it, Johnny. You're doing damned fine with the new one, though."

"Thanks."

"What do you plan on doing, now that you're home?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I haven't thought much

about it yet."

"Going back to your law practice?"

I shrugged again. "Maybe. I'm not sure. Don't imagine there's much left."

"You mean generally, or for you?"

I shrugged noncommittally. "I don't know. Maybe both ways."

Hendricks smiled. "The law business isn't too red hot right now generally," he agreed. "But specifically, as far as Floyd Hendricks is concerned, it's a damn good deal."

"Plus politics," I said.

"Plus or minus it's still a good deal, Johnny. You know how much I've expanded since you left. It hasn't all been on politics. Just look around you," he waved his hand at his office, "and you'll know that I'm operating at about twice the cost before."

"I suppose you are," I granted.

"And I'm making about four times as much."

"Congratulations," I said dryly.

HENDRICKS brushed this irony away casually. "Don't get me wrong," he said. "I'm not bragging. I'm just trying to show you what a good deal you can get into."

"I don't get that," I said. And I didn't.

"What I'm getting at is this—why don't you come into my practice with me? I can offer you a good deal."

It knocked the breath out of me. Hendricks shrewdly and immediately evaluated my reaction and pressed on in with his offer.

"How about it, Johnny? You can practically write your own ticket. Hendricks and Christopher will be a team to set this town on end."

I shook my head. "Uh, uh," I said.

Hendricks looked unbelieving. How's that? You kidding?"

"No," I said. "No dice. Thanks just the same. I'm not ready to go

back to law yet, and if I were, I don't think we'd jell, Hendricks. We'd be oil and water. No."

Hendricks looked sore, and he looked even more angry at the realization that he wasn't hiding this reaction too well.

"That's the way you want it, eh?"

"That's the way I see it," I said.

Hendricks had regained his composure. He was bland again. He shrugged casually.

"All right, Johnny. Anything you say." He flashed a sudden grin. "You might find it hard to believe, but I rather counted on your joining me."

"It just doesn't jibe," I said. "We've never been anything but at odds. I've fought you in politics, I've fought you in court. When we were kids on the West Side, we fought in the streets."

"I know that, Johnny," he said. "But you'll remember that we both were always the leaders. Even in those kids fights it was your gang against mine. Had we been adult, Johnny, had we been able to figure it out sensibly, we'd have realized that we could have gotten together and run the entire show. But that's what I've realized since you've been away."

"Sensible," I said. "But very much unlike you. What brought you to such an about-face?"

"I didn't arrive at the brilliant idea all alone, Johnny," Hendricks said. "My wife was highly instrumental in figuring it out for me."

I was a little surprised. "Your wife? You've gotten married, then, since I left. Do I know the girl?"

Hendricks reached over and turned a leather photograph frame on his desk so that it faced me. I hadn't paid any attention to it until now.

The girl in the picture was familiar. Brown hair, gray eyes, lovely, delicately shaped features, an unforgettable smile.

"Congratulations," I said flatly. "Madge is a lovely girl. When did the wedding take place?"

Hendricks was smiling now, and I didn't like his smile.

"A year ago, Johnny," he said. "We were married a year ago last week. She's a great kid."

I nodded. "Just a year ago last week I was coming back from Africa, via transport plane, headed for a hospital here in the States. I didn't know about it, afterwards. They had a good reason, I can see now, for not letting me get Madge's letters."

"Madge wrote you the week before we decided to marry," Johnny said. "That must have been one of the letters you didn't get. She explained it all. Don't feel bad towards her. After all, you were a long ways off. It didn't look as if you'd come back for a long time, if at all. And we were in love. When she learned what had happened to you we were already married. There was nothing we could do, then. We decided that it would be best to wait it out until you came home and learned what had happened."

I SCARCELY heard him. I was talking half aloud, and to myself. Making swift, stabbing adjustments, trying to rationalize.

"Now it's very clear why her letters stopped. I had never figured that something like this was the reason. I attributed it to something else. Well, now I know, and as I said before, congratulations, Hendricks."

Hendricks looked suddenly embarrassed. I couldn't tell if it was real or phony.

"I know you were in love with her," he said. "I know you two were engaged when you went away. But some things happen in funny ways. They even happen for the best, more often

than not."

"Sure," I said. "I suppose they do. So it was Madge who wanted you to take me into your firm? It was Madge who talked you into forgetting our feud, and who figured it would be just ducky if we teamed up."

"It was Madge who put the idea before me, Johnny. But I was able to see what a sensible thing it was, myself."

I sighed. "Thank Madge, and tell her what I told you. Uh, uh. No. If I go back into practice I'll be on my own."

"Think it over, anyway, Johnny," Hendricks said. "I'm not trying to rush you. There's plenty of time, and the offer will still hold until you decide what you're going to do."

I nodded.

"Well, that's all, I guess. All but the one important thing I came here to find out about."

"What's that?"

"Tommy," I said. "What happened to Tommy doesn't ring straight. He wasn't that kind of a kid. He was working for you when he was killed, Hendricks. I don't know why you persuaded the kid to work for you, but that's incidental. What I want to know, what I came here to find out, is some grain of truth about Tommy's death."

Hendricks' expression was somber. He picked up a paper knife on the edge of his desk, and began to toy with it.

"You heard how it happened," he said.

"I heard."

"That's all there was to it," he said. "You heard the straight goods. Tommy was shot by a cop, running away from the scene of a robbery. His body was identified positively by the victim of the robbery. I—I hate to have to tell you this, but Tommy went a little screwy before he was killed. He was a

problem. Frankly, that's why I gave the kid a job, to try to straighten him out. I guess I didn't do it well enough."

I found a cigarette and lighted it. I looked at Hendricks in silence for a moment. His face was registering polite sorrow, restrained embarrassment. His face could register whatever he wanted it to.

"I didn't think you'd tell me anything else," I said. "I just wanted to let you know I'm going to get to the bottom of it, however. I'm going to find out what really caused Tommy's death."

Hendricks looked hurt, and sad.

"I don't quite get you, Johnny," he said. "I'm sorry that it happened to your kid brother the way it did. I'm even more sorry that it's going to cause you such a wild goose chase. You won't find anything but what's official, what you know already. There's nothing else to find out."

I stood up, nodding.

"So they say. But maybe you can tell me something else."

"Anything you want to know, Johnny," Hendricks said easily.

"Is Nick Alex working for your organization these days?"

His eyebrows went up slightly.

"Why do you ask that?"

"I want to know," I said. "Is he?"

Hendricks shrugged elaborately. "You might call it that, Johnny. Although he isn't on any payroll. He's influential with a certain voting element, and handy to have around. His past reputation wasn't exactly savory, but lots of things can change. And in politics you have to—"

"Close your eyes to certain unwholesome bedfellows, is that it?" I asked.

Hendricks smiled a trifle stiffly.

"You might put it that way, Johnny. One has to be realistic in politics."

"So Alex is working for you now,

eh?" I said reflectively. "And not on the payroll. Where's he get his cut? He's never been interested in peanuts."

Hendricks was holding back his temper.

"You're thinking yourself into a dizzy series of circles, Johnny," he said

I turned toward the door.

"Maybe," I said. "But I'm not quitting until I know the truth. You can pass that along to whom it may concern."

Hendricks rose to escort me to the door.

"Don't bother," I told him. I closed the door, leaving him standing there beside his desk, looking hurt, and sad. . .

CHAPTER VI

I WALKED the four loop blocks to my hotel. But I didn't go up to my room right away. I stepped into the bar just off the lobby and ordered a Tom Collins.

I sat there smoking and thinking and trying to plan my next move. A piano was tinkling in the far corner of the bar, a talented colored boy making those eighty-eight keys cry nostalgia with an old tune called, "*Will You Still Be Mine?*"

It had been a tune Madge and I danced to many times in the hours just before the war. The associations it carried were bittersweet, and I tried to shake them out of my mind.

I could remember her the day I'd left, standing at the station, cute and blonde and sad eyed, waving and running along side the car until the train was moving so fast she couldn't keep up with it any longer. I'd thought then that she'd never let me down.

I had another Collins, to try to wash away the picture of Madge as Hendricks' wife. It helped a little, but not completely, for the pianist drifted laz-

ily into another nostalgic tune that hurt. I gulped the rest of my drink and got out in a hurry.

I was passing through the lobby, headed toward the desk to pick up my key, when a voice called from the cigar counter to my left:

"My God! Johnny Christopher!"

I stopped, turned, and saw a tall, emaciated young man in a badly unpressed suit of white linens coming my way. He'd been standing at the counter, evidently gabbing with the cigarette girl, and now as he advanced toward me his hand was outstretched and his lopsided grin was as enormous and as friendly as a puppy's

That happy-go-ear-splitting grin, that abused panama hat and the lank black hair beneath it, those twinkling eyes that were shrewd as hell and didn't miss anything—they all added up to Paul Tobin.

"Paul, you triple profane horse's something or other!" I said.

Then Paul Tobin was pumping my hand and slapping me on the back and wondering with beautifully couched obscenities how long I'd been back, where I'd been hiding, why I hadn't gotten in touch with him.

I answered his machine gun like questions as quickly as he popped them.

"Still working for the Journal? I was finally able to ask him. Johnny had been one of the city's crack police reporters for some six years. It was during these years that I'd gotten to know him. He was a familiar figure around the Criminal Courts building, and not at all popular with the shyster-type lawyers who were more than occasional visitors there. For the honest, hard-working, somewhat simple law practitioners like myself, however, Paul had always been a Godsend. For every shyster Paul had taken a poke at in his news stories, there were always several hard-working young lawyers to whom he

gave a boost when he could.

"Same old stand, Johnny," he said. "You'd think I'd be City Editor by now. But I'm still legging it between 11th and State and 26th and California. Come on," he took my arm, "I'm buying you a drink, bud. And then you're buying me two back for it."

HE LED me into the off-the-lobby bar, we found stools, and he ordered two double-scotches.

"You going back to work? he demanded, eyeing me closely, when the drinks came.

"I don't know," I told him truthfully. "I had an offer today."

"Damn fine," he said enthusiastically. "Sound good?"

"Floyd Hendricks," I said flatly.

Paul almost choked on his drink. He put the glass slowly back on the bar. Then he whistled incredulously.

"Hendricks!"

I nodded. "Of course," I said, "I dropped gratefully to my knees and said thank-you-sir-when-do-I-start."

Paul grinned. "I'd have spit in his eye."

"I felt like it," I said. "But I was politely chilling in my no-thanks."

Paul finished off his double scotch in a gulp, raised two fingers to the bartender. "The son of a dog!" he said. "He's rolling in dough, now, you know."

"His office looked like it. Where's he getting it all?"

"Politics, mostly. The old organization shake-down and pay-off plan. But there are rumors that he's coining more than a mere ward organization could net him."

"From what sources?" I asked.

"There are a few people who'd be curious to know," Paul said. "I'm one of them. There's also some talk of his taking a crack at running for State's Attorney next primaries."

I whistled. "He's really moving

along!"

Paul nodded. "The weight he throws now makes the weight he used to throw seem like feathers. He's smart. He's ambitious and highly unscrupulous, and has a beautiful wife to—" Paul broke off short in sudden embarrassment. "I—I'm sorry, Johnny. I wasn't thinking," he said.

"That's all right, Paul," I told him. "Forget it. I have."

We lapsed into a silence that lasted perhaps a minute. Then I looked at my watch.

"Listen," I said, "I'll call you at your place. Still there?"

He nodded. "This evening," I said. "There are some things I want to talk to you about very privately, Paul. I've got to run now. I just remembered things to do."

Paul grinned. "It's a date. Bring some scotch and I'll be putty in your hands, Johnny. See you then."

MY ROOM was on the tenth floor, and when I opened my door I caught the sharp stink of cordite instantly. Even though I hadn't had a whiff of it since Africa, there was no mistaking the smell.

I closed the door quickly and moved into the room.

Then I saw the gun on the dresser, It was mine, the .45 Army automatic I'd been able to keep as a souvenir of Africa. I'd carried it with me through every day spent in that campaign.

I picked it up, sniffed the barrel. I ejected the clip from the magazine, removing the remaining rounds and counting them as I did so. Four left. Then I noticed my suitcase on the bed. It was open, and lying beside it was the small box of ammunition I'd carried. I had never had the box open, had never loaded the clip.

I put the automatic back on the

dresser, dropped the rounds in my pocket, tossed the empty magazine clip onto the bed. I looked around the room slowly, trying to remember how I'd left it, what was changed, what was here that hadn't been here when I'd stepped out of it earlier in the day.

It wasn't much use. I couldn't see anything out of order save the opened suitcase, the box of ammo, and the gun. Then I noticed that the bathroom door was closed. I stepped across the room and opened it.

The smell of cordite came much more strongly to my nostrils now. The bathroom reeked of it. And I could see why. The shots from the .45 had been fired in the bathroom—and the result of those shots, huddled grotesquely in the bathtub, was the fully clothed corpse of what had been a bald-headed middle-aged man.

I didn't have to see the face to recognize Dinty Kerrigan, and I didn't have to lift that queerly slumped-forward head to see that the death bullets had caught Dinty on the left side of his cheek and jaw.

I wasn't sick. I wasn't particularly alarmed. There'd been too much death in North Africa to make the sight of another body effect me one way or the other.

I stepped over to the tub and drew the shower curtains around it, screening off the corpse. Then I stepped out of the bathroom and closed the door carefully.

I found a cigarette and sat down on the bed, staring at the telephone on the night table. I lighted the cigarette, thinking things over slowly, fairly calmly, trying to decide what I was going to do.

I realized, of course, that it was my gun that had killed Dinty. It was reasonable to believe that my .45 had been deliberately selected for the job, just as

deliberately left in evidence.

For another instant I hesitated. Then I reached for the telephone.

The telephone rang.

For a moment I stared at it in surprise. I picked it out of the cradle and held it to my ear without saying anything.

"Hello?"

A feminine voice came to my ears. A soft, somewhat throaty feminine voice that I recognized instantly.

"Hello," I said. "Christopher talking."

"Johnny!" the voice was tremulous, suddenly.

"How are you, Madge?" I said.

"Floyd told me you were home, Johnny," Madge said. "I—I had to call you."

"Yes," I said, "I'm home, Madge. It's nice of you to call. I understand my belated congratulations are in order."

THERE was half a minute of embarrassed silence.

"Johnny—" Madge faltered finally, "you—you never got my letter."

"Not that one," I said.

"Oh, Johnny. Please, I mean—listen, Johnny." Her voice became distraught, urgent.

"I'm listening."

"Can you come out here? Now? Right away?"

"Where are you calling from?"

"I'm home—we're living in Beverly Hills. The address is in the telephone book."

"Your husband knows you're calling me, Madge?"

Another moment of hesitation. "No. No, Johnny. Floyd doesn't know. He isn't here. He's golfing this afternoon. He won't be home until later in the evening."

"You're very discreet, Mrs. Hendricks."

"Johnny, please," she begged. "Can you come out? If not I'll meet you downtown, anywhere you say. Yes, that might be best, Johnny. Please say you will."

I looked at the bathroom door.

"I have company," I said. "I don't know how long I'll be tied up here with it."

"I'll be in the Petite Cafe," Madge said quickly. "I'll wait there as long as necessary, Johnny. I'll be down town in an hour. Please try to make it. It's dreadfully important."

"What does it concern?"

"I can't tell you here. Not over the phone. I'll start right now for the Loop. Don't fail me, Johnny. I'll wait."

"You said that once before, a long time ago," I began. But Madge didn't hear. She had hung up.

I put the telephone back in the cradle, lighted a fresh cigarette from the stub of the one I'd just finished. I got up and walked to the window. Down in the streets of the Loop crowds were milling along in typical ant-hill pattern.

I turned to the bathroom door.

"It's not polite, Dinty," I said, "but I think it might be best if I leave you alone a bit. I don't think you'll be noticed until I call attention to you."

It was good, I reflected, that I'd kept my key and hadn't had to pick it up at the desk before going to my room. I was reasonably certain that I hadn't been noticed going up to the room in the elevator. I could see to it that I wasn't noticed leaving the place. It wouldn't make for easy explaining to the police why I'd decided not to report the body in my room until later. And, as it was, there were many things about Dinty's death that I was going to have difficulty in explaining to the police.

I walked down two floors, took an elevator in a different corridor to the

lobby, emerged less than thirty feet from the side entrance to the hotel. It was a simple matter to reach the street unnoticed.

Once outside, I walked east to Dearborn Street, turned left after a block or so more and cut onto State. I glanced again at my watch. From the time Madge had called the hotel, she'd have had just about time to make her appointment with me. I didn't want to arrive late. Whatever it was that she had to say was something I'd have to clear up in a hurry. After all, I still had the matter of a corpse in my bathtub to clean up eventually. Every minute I stalled in calling the police made it just a little more difficult to explain when the time came.

CHAPTER VII

I TOOK a small table in the cocktail lounge of the Petite Cafe, ordered a scotch and sat there watching the lights on the walls change colors every few minutes.

The place wasn't crowded yet, and I had an excellent view of the door. If Madge came in I'd be able to spot her instantly. I wondered idly, through my first drink, if she'd changed at all, and if she had, what changes there'd be.

Several drinks after that I took another look at my watch. It was after four. She'd already had more than enough time, even if she had been unhurried, to get from Beverly Hills to the Loop. I wondered what was keeping her.

I used some of my waiting time to scrape up an explanation—to be used later on the police—for the presence of Dinty Kerrigan's body in my bathtub, and for the presence of slugs from my gun in his head. This wasn't easy. I didn't know what sort of an explanation would be needed. I didn't know,

really, that any explanation would be wise. The simple truth, undoctored, that I didn't know a thing about it, would possibly serve me best.

However, I was beginning to feel a little bit like a damned fool for not having announced the discovery of the body as soon as I'd found it. My idea of leaving the hotel quietly, deciding to claim I hadn't been in my room earlier, might have been a good one. But there was no way of being sure that I'd not been noticed.

There wasn't anything I could do about it, however. If someone were to testify that I'd been coming out of the elevator into the hotel lobby—obviously from my room—around three o'clock, there'd be a mortar crater half a mile wide shot into my idea of "discovering" Dinty's corpse later in the day. Even a simple-minded coroner would be able to set a fair approximation of the time of Dinty's death.

It was ten minutes after five, now, and I was spending most of my time glancing up at the entrance of the cafe, watching the people who were now beginning to come in in far greater numbers than before.

I'd had about half a scotch more than I'd needed, and so I called off the next one and told the waiter to bring me a dinner menu instead. A little food between drinks wouldn't hurt.

I ate the dinner alone. I had another drink after that. It was six-thirty. Madge had obviously left me high and dry. I called for my check, paid it, and left, cursing mad—sore at her, and sore at myself for having been such a damned fool.

Out on the corner of Adams and Wash I lighted a cigarette and looked around for a cab. It was then that a nasty thought caught me right between the eyes. Madge had called me at the hotel. I had said I had company. She

could well establish the time she'd called me, prove beyond a doubt that I was in my room at that time. My idea of "discovering" Dinty's body was now completely shattered.

A newsboy on the corner was shouting "Wuxtra" and waving a copy of the tabloid *Daily Times*. "Big murder!" was the way the kid phrased the reason for the extra.

I bought a copy of the sheet instantler, stepped into the doorway of a closed store to look it over.

BARKEEP SLAIN IN LOOP HOTEL, was the streamer headline.

In smaller caps, the sub-head proclaimed, **WAR-HERO SOUGHT IN MURDER MYSTERY**

I turned the page, found the story and got the details. Notified by a mysterious telephone call, police had gone to my hotel room at four-fifteen and discovered the body of Dinty Kerrigan in my bathtub. They had also picked up the murder weapon, the .45, and had spent the rest of the time tying together a number of links that confirmed me as a killer.

There was no mention of a telephone call, Madge's, having come to my room around three. But I knew that they'd have that information, even though they might not have handed it out to the newspapers. Neither was there any mention of my having been seen leaving the hotel around three-thirty.

On the following page there was a small story concerning my days as a criminal lawyer, pre-Pearl Harbor, my military record, and a few other biographical items. A picture, gleaned from their photography morgue, showed me as I was in my up-and-coming days of 1938.

I FOLDED the paper carefully, stuffed it into my pocket, flicked my cigarette away. There was a Walgreen's

down at the end of the block, and I went there.

In the telephone booth, I looked up the home number of Floyd Hendricks. I remembered Madge had said that Hendricks would not be home until late, due to his golfing date. I was counting on this, and hoping that she'd be at home.

The number didn't seem to answer, and I was about to hang up, when I heard the faint click that indicated someone on the other end of the wire had picked up the receiver.

I waited a minute, hoping that the party would speak first, giving me a chance to find out who was answering.

But there wasn't a word spoken, and I had to say:

"Hello? Hello?"

There was another click then, and I knew that the connection had been broken. Whoever had answered had hung up without saying a word. I cursed, left the booth, and looked up Paul Tobin's number in the directory.

After half a minute, Paul answered the telephone.

"Tobin speaking," he said typically. "Spill it."

"This is Johnny, Paul."

There was a moment of silence, then Paul whistled.

"Well, well, chum. You've been a busy little beaver today, eh?"

"So it seems," I said.

"You calling from Headquarters, Johnny?" Paul asked. "You want me to come down there and—"

I cut him off. "Uh-uh, Paul. I'm still at large. I'm calling from a Walgreen's in the Loop. I just read the papers. Guess I'm a bit of a celebrity."

"Damn, Johnny," Tobin said, "I heard about it only fifteen minutes ago, over the radio. Listen, kid, where are you again?"

I repeated where I was.

"Jump in a cab, Johnny," Paul said. "Right away. There's no one here at my place but me. Come right over. We'll put our heads together on this thing and see what we can work out. Incidentally, skip the scotch. I've plenty right here, and it might not be smart for you to play customer in liquor stores right now."

I hesitated an instant.

"What's wrong?" Paul demanded.

"I'm thinking about the nice mess I'll make if I drag you into this," I said. "It isn't fair. You'll be an accessory after the fact if I come over there, and —"

"Go to hell," Paul chuckled. Then he added an obscene estimate of my IQ. "This is the time a fella needs a friend, Johnny. I'm it. Get in that cab and come over."

I thanked him, hung up, and went out onto the corner of Adams and Wabash to hail a cab. . . .

CHAPTER VIII

PAUL TOBIN'S place was a comfortable apartment on Lincoln Park West. It was in an old remodeled-to-swank building, and comprised four spacious rooms, each with an open fireplace—an unnecessary luxury at this time of year.

Tobin's place was typically bachelor quarters in tone. He had the usual book-crammed living room, bursting with overstuffed chairs and masculine doodads.

He met me at the door with a glass of scotch, pushed it into my hand and ordered me to sit down and relax.

I sat down and tried to do so.

Paul, wearing a battered robe of once austere satin, his feet pushed into decrepit gray slippers, looked like a gaunt Ichabod Crane. His lean, hollow-cheeked face, his long, straight black

hair, his sardonic slash of a mouth, gave him an additional touch somewhat Sherlock Holmesian.

"So you keep your bodies in the bathtub these hot days, eh, Johnny?" he said as I sat down. "A thoughtfully considerate gesture that proves you aren't the murdering kind."

"It was all I could do to keep from calling room service for ice," I agreed. "Really, though, Paul, I don't know what in the hell to do. I'm in as tough a spot as I ever was in my life—African service included."

"Dinty Kerrigan, eh?" Paul said.

I nodded.

"He wasn't a bad old guy," Paul continued. "He knew a hell of a lot more than he ever said."

"I guess he did," I agreed. I was about to tell him of my talk with Kerrigan early in the afternoon, but he was talking on.

"I want you to tell me something very frankly, Johnny," Paul was saying, looking at his glass. "I want you to know that your answer won't make a damned bit of difference as far as my sticking by you goes. Understand that part. Okay, did you kill Kerrigan?"

The question jolted me. I looked up at Paul quickly, saw that he was deadly serious.

"Good God, no!" I said.

"Okay, okay. That suits me fine," Paul declared quickly. "I just wanted a straight answer, Johnny. I didn't think you did it, but you hadn't said directly that you didn't."

"Well I didn't," I said, still a little nettled.

"What was Kerrigan doing in your room, Johnny?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

"You haven't any idea? Did you see him since you were back here?"

I nodded. "Yes. I saw him, Paul. I saw him early this afternoon."

"Accidentally, or on purpose?"

"On purpose, Paul. I wanted to ask him some questions. He couldn't or wouldn't give me any answers. I left. Maybe you'd better let me tell you the whole thing, then you'll understand better, Paul. It all begins with my finding out what happened to Tommy."

Paul nodded somberly. "I was wondering about Tommy, Johnny. You didn't ask me anything about it. I figured maybe you wanted to try to forget it. But I sort of had a hunch you weren't thinking of doing anything of the sort. Okay, tell it to me from the beginning."

I LET him have it, straight from the beginning. I didn't omit a thing, from my visit to Mrs. Spiros right on through. I made it brief, but slow and clear, and Paul nodded from time to time but didn't interrupt. When I had finished he stood up, took my glass, and said:

"I'll mix us another drink, Johnny."

When he came back with a pair of fresh scotches, he handed me mine, took his armchair again, and said:

"I kind of figured all along you'd be sure to dig into the truth about Tommy's death, when you came home. I agree with you on one thing, Johnny. The kid wasn't a hoodlum. Something was fishy in the way he died."

"What do you know about it, Paul? Other than what the papers printed, I mean."

Paul Tobin shook his head. "Not a damn thing, Johnny. I was out of town on a story the week Tommy was killed. I'd have gone into the story tooth and nail had I been on hand. When I came back to town it was all history, cut and dried, closed tight. I—I'm sorry I never carried on from the one fact I knew—that Tommy wasn't a bad kid."

"I'm not blaming you for that, Paul," I said. "Don't think I am. All I wanted to know was what you knew about it."

Paul's slash of a mouth was tightly disappointed.

"Not a thing, Johnny. Not a damned thing. But, if you'll forgive me for digressing, I'm sure that what happened to Kerrigan today must have some bearing on the questions you asked him. Maybe, as you figure, he knew something about the real story on Tommy's death. Maybe that's why he went to your room."

"But how would he know where I was staying?" I demanded. "I don't remember telling him."

Paul shrugged. "That wouldn't be hard to find out. A few telephone calls to Loop hotels. Six would practically insure his finding you registered at one of them."

"And Madge," I said. "She knew where I was staying. She couldn't have found out from Hendricks. I didn't tell him. Yet she called me."

"That's a little tougher," Tobin agreed. "But it could be explained the same way. What's important now is this—who killed Dinty Kerrigan? Why was he in your room? Did Kerrigan have something to tell you? If he did, why did he wait? What did he have to say?"

"Very neat," I said. "Very compact. All the questions. We might add, why did Madge call me? What did she want to tell me? Why did she stand me up? And why the funny business on the telephone when I called her home just before I called you?"

Paul nodded. "And, more immediately, chum, what in the hell are you going to do? You're wanted right now for a murder—at least for heavy questioning that you won't have any snap getting out of. You can count on my

not saying anything about having seen you in the lobby right after you discovered the body. But you don't know if Madge is going to mention her telephone conversation with you."

"Thanks," I said gratefully. "No. I don't know what Madge's reaction will be."

"I personally am willing to bet that she won't say a word," Paul said.

"Why not?"

"I don't think her husband knew she was calling. I don't think she wanted anyone to know she was calling, save yourself. I think that she'll keep mum for that reason, if for none other."

"Look," I said, "maybe this doesn't have anything to do with it, maybe it does. But I ran into Nick Alex today, in the back-copy office of the *Journal*. He's connected with Hendricks in some fashion these days. Looks like he's doing well. What's his angle?"

Paul rubbed his chin.

"I know he's been messing up to his dirty ears in politics lately," Paul said. "He's quieted down on his old rackets as far as is known. Runs his handbooks, and so on, and is a pretty important lad in some phase of the Hendricks organization. He's able to wield some influence with the Greek vote in Hendricks' ward."

I sat up straight.

"The hell he is!" I protested. "They've never listened to or respected Alex. I know that for sure, Paul. They're my people. They wouldn't let a rat like Nick Alex sell them a bill of goods any day in the week."

Paul shrugged. "There have been a lot of changes since you left for the wars, Johnny. A hell of a lot of changes. Somehow Nick Alex has regained the confidence of many of your people in your old neighborhood. He's pretty popular now. Don't ask me how he's done it, but he has."

I WAS shocked and disgusted. I couldn't believe it, but I knew Paul wouldn't misinform me on that angle.

"He was looking through a back copy file that was identical to the one I'd gone to the *Journal* office to look up," I said.

"And you were looking up the news story on—"

"—Tommy's death," I broke in. "I had hoped that there might be something in it that would give me a lead of some sort. There wasn't."

Paul nodded soberly. "Of course there wasn't. The entire thing was pretty well covered up in no time at all. I was out of town, as I've said, and by the time I got back the story was cold and closed."

I lighted a cigarette.

"What the hell do you suppose Alex was doing in the back-copy office of the *Journal*? What the hell do you imagine he wanted from the same back-issue book I was reading?"

Paul shrugged, a characteristic gesture of his lean shoulders.

"He'd of course know what happened to Tommy," he said. "He wouldn't have to re-read a newspaper account in an old newspaper to find out. The average back-copy book contains half a month's issues of the *Journal*. The *Journal* carries a hell of a lot of news stories in half a month. He could have wanted anything; he could have been looking up any one of a thousand news items."

I nodded.

"You're right. It was just a long shot hunch. Only Alex as now in the Hendricks organization. Hendricks had Tommy working for him at the time the kid was killed. I can't overlook any connection."

"I don't blame you," Paul said. "We'll file that bit of info with the rest of the dope. Maybe it'll spell some-

thing later. But now we've something more immediate to think of. You're in a little bit of a spot. We've got to get you out of it."

"Then you think I ought to visit the cops?" I demanded.

"I think," said Paul, "that we ought to climb into my car right now and go over to Central Station. I think you ought to pretend complete amazement at the whole thing. Don't mention having found him. Let the coppers think they were first to discover the body. You've got my promise of silence, and we can bank—I'm sure—on Madge not saying anything. I think you hadn't better mention the angle about Tommy. Just play it close. Admit you stopped in at Dinty's bar and had a drink. Tell 'em you talked to Hendricks. Don't tell 'em what you said at either place."

I thought this over. "And then?"

"And then I think you'll get a break," Paul said. "In fact, I can assure you of a break if they aren't willing to release you until the inquest. I'll just tell 'em that I'll flay their hides in a morning feature story dealing with their persecution of a war hero. You'll have reported in legitimately, you'll be freed in an hour or more, and we'll be able to get to work on this thing properly."

Paul Tobin crushed out his cigarette, finished off his scotch, looked at me somberly, then suddenly grinned.

"What do you think, Johnny?"

"I think you're a smart boy, Paul. And a damned fine guy. Let's go! I'm turning myself in."

"Wait'll I change," said Paul, "and we'll get right down there."

CHAPTER IX

WE WERE in Lieutenant Lassar's office in Central Headquarters at

Eleventh and State. Lassar was a short, thin, wiry little guy who wore pin-striped suits and two-toned shirts and black patent leather shoes. His ears were cauliflowered, his nose badly in need of reshaping as a result of a hundred odd fights he'd had growing up on Chicago's old West Side. He was a smart boy. Smart as hell, and as slick as his tonic-gleaming shiny black hair. Lassar and I weren't strangers. I'd always liked the little guy, and he'd passed out a number of favors to me back in the old days at the criminal courts.

He had just finished reading a type-written statement I'd made before his stenographers. He put it down and wiped his forehead with an immaculate white handkerchief.

"That's all you have to say, eh, Johnny?"

I nodded. "That's all."

"You don't know what Kerrigan was doing in your room?"

"No," I said.

"You don't know who'd know you had that gun in your bag?"

"No. I don't."

"Haven't any idea of who'd try to pin a murder charge on you?"

"Not the slightest," I said.

Lassar sighed. He looked out the window down into the dusty darkness of South State Street. Faintly, the noise of a street car rattling by came floating to us. He turned abruptly.

"I could hold you, easily enough. You know that, don't you, Johnny?"

I didn't say anything.

"Yes, I could hold you for further questioning. Plenty of it. But I think I'll wait until the inquest for that. I think I'll release you on your word. You'll be watched, even if your word doesn't pan out, and we'll always be able to get you when we want to."

I got up. "Then I can leave?"

Lassar nodded. "Yeah. You're free to go, Johnny."

"Thanks," I said.

Lassar smiled. His teeth were jagged where they'd been broken in front, but they were very, very white.

"Don't mention it," he said. He turned to Tobin, the stenographers, and several homicide squad men who were present. "If you people will step outside a moment, I'd like to have a word with Johnny."

We were left alone, and Lassar sat down on the edge of his desk, lighting a kitchen match with his thumb nail. He watched it burn out, then threw it away. He'd never smoked, but he had always had this habit of striking matches just to see the fire.

"You don't have anything you want to add to your statement, do you, Johnny?" he demanded.

I frowned. "I don't get you."

He shrugged, elaborately casual. "I thought there might be something that you'd forgotten, or something you'd rather have for my ears only. I suppose you know I'm playing this with every legitimate break I can give you, Johnny."

I nodded.

"Even in my thinking, Johnny," he said, "I'm giving you a break. So far, I've approached this thing from the angle that you aren't a killer. That's because I like you, and feel I know you pretty well."

"Thanks," I said simply.

"Nothing to add?" Lassar asked.

"No," I said.

Lassar sighed. "Okay, Johnny. Just wanted to make sure. I'll keep in touch with you. Be good. Be smart. So long."

I LEFT the office. In the hallway, Tobin was waiting for me. He grinned happily, slapped my back.

"Didn't I tell you, Johnny?"

I nodded. "You were right as rain, Paul. Lassar was pretty white about it."

"Lassar is a good guy," Paul said. "A square, smart cop. Lucky he's on this case."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess I am."

"You look worn out, kid," Paul declared. "You've had a busy day."

I admitted that I was pretty done in.

"Look . . ." Paul took out some keys, slid one off a ring, pressed it into my hand. "You don't want to go back to that hotel. You'd get no rest there. I've gotta work tonight, you know. We publish a morning sheet, same as ever. What do you say to catch a cab and go over to my place. The sheets are fresh, the place is comfortable, and I'll be home in the morning to play Jeeves with a good breakfast of gin and fried eggs. What say?"

"You're a damned angel, chum, that's what I say," I told him, taking the key.

"Hell no," Paul grinned, "I'm a smart reporter keeping close to the source of hot news. Just think of the inside stuff I'll be able to hand the readers in tomorrow morning's developments on Dinty's murder."

I sighed. "Damned ghoul. But I'm all in. I've got your key, and I can't keep my eyes open."

CHAPTER X

PAUL TOBIN'S apartment had been a fine suggestion. It was comfortable, and beyond reach of anyone who might want to bother me. I set his rusty alarm for five o'clock, allowing myself the luxury of eight hours, telephoned a rent-a-car joint and made arrangements for them to have one of their hacks outside Tobin's apartment by a quarter after.

Then I climbed into bed, and went off into dreamless exhaustion with the smooth spinning purr of a top.

I woke to the alarm eight hours later, feeling a hundred percent refreshed. Paul's icebox yielded eggs and bacon, and I worked them into a breakfast topped off with tomato juice in less than fifteen minutes.

I was dressed in another five minutes, and at the door when I remembered that I'd forgotten to let Paul in on my morning plans. I found some paper and an envelope, wrote him a brief note, slipped the key into the envelope, addressed it and sealed it, and left the apartment. In the hallway I stuffed the envelope into his mailbox, leaving enough of it sticking out to be visible to him when he came home.

Outside, it was still dark. But dawn was coming up faintly out over the lake, and the birds in the park were raising a wonderfully pleasant racket.

I stood on the curb, lighted a cigarette, and watched my rented car pull up less than four minutes later.

Filling out the blanks the rent-a-car attendant gave me, a moment later, I gave him money for my deposit, added a tip, and climbed in behind the wheel.

"Where's your garage?" I said.

"About three blocks over," he said.

I grinned. "Then you won't mind walking back. It's a nice morning for it."

I threw the car into gear and whirred off, heading north. At North Avenue I turned west, glanced at my watch. In about forty-five minutes I should be rolling up in front of the suburban home of ex-copper Henry Boyko.

It would be an early hour for him, no doubt, in his gentleman-of-leisure status. But it might leave him a little bit too confused and sleepy to do any really skillful lying in answering the questions I had to ask him.

I remembered, then, that not only had I forgotten to tell Paul of my plan to see Boyko this morning, but that I'd also failed to mention to him what I'd learned about the ex-cop's sudden change of financial and social status. But the note, I reasoned, would bring Tobin up to date on those accidental omissions.

I was in the west side sectors of the city, now, and I remembered Sam Lassar's promise that he'd have one of his homicide boys on my tail at all times—just in case I tried to run out on the law.

I slowed down a little, looking back over my shoulder. The street behind me was deserted, save for a rocking streetcar far in the distance. Lassar's shadow might well have knocked off for a few hours and not been on hand when I'd made my early exit from the apartment.

The residential sectors began to fade away, and I was driving through open subdivision sections, relics of a long past real estate boom which had never gotten past the lots-for-sale stage.

Then I passed a sign that said, LONGWOOD, FIVE MILES.

Longwood was the suburb where I'd find Boyko.

Less than ten minutes later I passed another sign: Entering Longwood, Pop. 2200.

I SLOWED down and began to look around for Burton Street. The houses in this suburb were comparatively new, obviously upper middle income bracket dwellings. Spacious, well-tended lawns, clean streets and a plentiful supply of trees to shade them, gave the suburban section an air of smugly respectable pleasantness.

Finding Burton Street, I tore my attention from the scenery and began to look at street numbers. The houses on

Burton were smaller than some of the others I'd seen already, four and five room bungalows, heavily shaded by thick poplar trees.

After five blocks of Burton Street I found Boyko's house. It was a bungalow, brick, large enough to contain four or five rooms. The lawn, which wasn't as visible as its neighbors—due to an excess of the big poplar trees around the place—was not at all as well tended as the other lawns in the neighborhood. The shrubbery, too, was ragged and unclipped.

I parked the car, climbed out, and started up the walk to the house. On either side of me, the thick, unkempt shrubbery came almost shoulder high. It ran to the porch, shielding the doorway from view beyond a short L turn.

I was halfway up the walk when the shot cracked out sharply in the morning air.

Something *zzzzinged* past my head at the same moment that I hurled myself instinctively to the walk and rolled over into the dirt beside the shrubs.

I heard a door slam, then, but I didn't move. I held my breath and kept my head down. The slamming door might be a trick to make me expose myself to a second shot.

I said a silent prayer that my sniper wouldn't realize I was unarmed. All he'd have to do under those circumstances would be to step down the walk into view, take more careful aim—and that would be the last of Johnny Christopher.

A minute passed, maybe more. I still didn't move. And then I heard the motor starting in the back of the house.

Gears clashed, and I realized that my assailant was making a getaway down the back alley.

I got up and moved as quickly as my one false leg would permit. I got

to the car, started it up, killed the motor, cursed, got it started again.

Then I relaxed, shut off the ignition. The sound of the sniper's motor was no longer audible. He'd be beyond chase, and there was no use in my setting out to catch him now.

I got out of the car, brushing some of the shrubbery dirt from my clothes, and went back up the walk. I wasn't particularly cautious. I was certain that the sniper wasn't behind the porch shrubs any longer.

At the door, I hesitated a moment. It would be ridiculous to ring. I tried the knob. The door wasn't locked. I pushed it open quickly, flattening myself back out of view as I did so. I wasn't taking any chances.

Nothing happened, so I stepped away from the wall and into the house.

"Hello!" I said loudly.

There wasn't any answer.

I looked around the living room. Ordinary, comfortable, fairly expensive furnishings. Gone a little to seed through lack of attention or cleaning. The place looked like bachelor quarters. Quarters, that is, of a rather sloppy and careless bachelor.

In the hallway leading to the bedroom, I saw the handkerchief on the floor.

It was a man's handkerchief. Silk, expensive. I picked it up. In one corner were embroidered initials: "F/H"

I put the handkerchief in my pocket, moved on into the bedroom, which was darkened due to the fact that the shades had been pulled to window sill level.

It took a moment for me to accustom my eyes to the half light. And then I was able to make out the body in the bed.

His throat had been slit. Between his chin and chest there was a thick, sickening river of red that had already

stained much of the bed clothing.

I didn't need intuition to tell me that I was staring at the corpse of the man I had come here to question. Henry Boyko, ex-copper, ex-kidkiller, lay dead in a puddle of his own blood.

I wasn't going to get the answers to my questions from him. I was certain of that much. . . .

LEAVING the bungalow, I was fairly certain that no one in the neighborhood had yet been roused. At least, from what I could see of the houses in the vicinity, no lights were on, no faces peered whitely through windows. It occurred to me then that the sound of the shot had probably not been as loud as it had seemed to me, and that Boyko's murder, committed soundlessly, could scarcely be expected to rouse a neighborhood.

Nevertheless, I didn't waste time getting away from there, and I didn't do any deep breathing until I was leaving the Longwood township limits.

I was cursing myself, by now, for my caution in following up the sniper after the door had slammed. However, I could still realize that it could well have been a trick, and, had I blundered into a trap, there wouldn't have been any further following of anyone. . . .

CHAPTER XI

THE ENVELOPE I'd left in the mailbox for Paul Tobin was gone when I got back to the apartment. I rang the bell, and after a moment or two, the buzzer sounded, admitting me to the hall.

Paul met me at the door. His lank black hair was rumpled, and his eyes were sleepy. He was wearing his lounging robe over his pajamas, and hadn't bothered to put on his frayed slippers.

"Well, well," he mumbled sleepily,

"fine thing. Out prowling around before the worms rise to be gotten by the birds. You must have made a hit with that copper, waking him up before the roosters."

I followed him into the living room, tossed my hat onto a chair, sat down on the couch and lighted a smoke.

"I didn't get to talk to Boyko," I said.

Paul's eyebrows rose. "He throw you out?"

I shook my head. "By the time I got there, someone had slit his throat. Probably while he slept. The body was in his bed."

Paul's reaction was a low whistle.

"Wow!" he said.

"Strike two on somebody's hit parade," I agreed.

"You notify the law?" he asked.

"That would be all I'd need," I said.

"No. There didn't seem to be any indication that my visit was noticed by the neighbors, so I got out of there as fast as I could."

"Would you mind explaining it a little more?" Paul said. "I still can't get it all straight. You just walked into the house, and there was the body?"

"Not quite as easily as that. I met his killer," I said.

"What!" Paul sat up on the edge of his chair.

"Not formally," I said, "it was just a shooting acquaintance." And then I told him everything that had happened, from the sniper's shot to my departure. When I'd finished, he fished a cigarette out of the pocket of his robe, lighted it, exhaled noisily.

"You *did* go calling," he grunted. "Why in hell didn't you wait until I came home? I'd have gone there with you."

"It never occurred to me," I said. "Maybe it's just as well, though. You might have gotten in the way of the shot

that missed me."

Paul shrugged. "I'm too skinny. Grapeshot couldn't hit me. At any rate, that's neither here nor there. The pertinent thing, at the moment, is the handkerchief you picked up. Let me see it, will you?"

I handed him the silk handkerchief with the F/H monogram on it. He looked it over carefully.

"There are some small stains in the corner," he said, after a moment. "They could damn well be Boyko's blood. Has it occurred to you yet whose initials these might be?" He tossed the handkerchief back to me.

"Yes," I admitted. "You're damned right it has. That F/H could easily mean Floyd Hendricks."

Paul nodded. "It certainly could. But we'll have to fit it in a little better than that. You're merely supposing, you know, and so am I." He reached over to the coffee table and picked up a folded newspaper. He flipped it open and handed it to me. "However, we've something to start thinking about for a tie-in with this latest news break."

The paper was Paul's *Journal*. The headline was big and black and socked the breath right out of me.

LAWYER'S WIFE FOUND SLAIN IN STONE QUARRY

Right there on the front page, next to the story of the crime, was a picture similar to the one I'd seen on Hendricks desk the previous afternoon. A picture of Madge!

"Victim of Mystery Killing," proclaimed the caption above it.

MY HANDS were shaking badly, and I put the paper on my knees while I fumbled through my pockets for a cigarette.

"You don't have to read it," Paul said quietly. "I can give you the facts. Madge's body was found in a stone

quarry, beside her club coupe, on the northwest side of town. A watchman, making his rounds at midnight, wondered what the car was doing there. He found the body. Madge had been strangled by what the cops believe to be a piece of wire. The coroner claims she'd been dead eight to ten hours before his examination. That puts the death at anywhere between five and seven p.m., yesterday."

It was suddenly horribly clear to me why Madge had failed to keep her appointment at the Petite Cafe.

"What about her husband?" I managed to ask. "What about Hendricks? What has he to say?"

"That," said Paul, "is the point I was emphasizing in our tie-in with the handkerchief found on the scene of Boyko's murder."

"How do you mean?"

"As of two hours ago," Paul said, "before I went to bed, the cops haven't been able to locate Floyd Hendricks."

"But surely they must have him by now," I protested.

"If he was out at Boyko's," Paul reminded me, "he wasn't in their hands as of an hour ago. You heard him drive off then."

I stood up and walked to the window, the sun was rising over the lake and beginning to send smoky shafts through the trees in the park. It seemed pathetically incongruous standing there enshrouded by murder and violence and staring at such beauty. In Africa the killing and violence had at least been properly stage-managed by mud and ruins and desolation as background.

I turned to Paul.

"I was a fool not to call copper when I found Boyko's body," I said. "That's the second time I've played damned fool. Maybe it's force of habit. Over there, when you ran into a corpse you stepped around it and got on with the

job you were doing. That's not a bright policy here, however."

Paul shrugged. His brow was wrinkled in thoughts. His hands were deep in the pockets of his robe.

"I don't know, John," he said. "When you found Boyko you didn't know anything about Madge's being killed. I can't blame you for keeping mum on the Boyko job, knowing the little you did. But what Lassar and his homicide boys are going to think if they learn you were around Boyko's this morning . . ." He shrugged, letting the sentence trail off into implication.

"Any new cop announcements on the Kerrigan killing?" I asked.

Paul shook his head. "Nothing but rehashes and the usual police-promising-sensational-developments padding our rewrite men think up."

"What's your idea," I asked, "for my next move?"

"I can see only one move. Play pat. Stay right here until they pick up Hendricks," Paul said.

"That might be wise," I agreed.

"And safe," Paul said.

I frowned. "Safe?"

"Hendricks is on a rampage," Paul said. "It isn't wild presumption to figure he might be gunning for you."

"In that event," I said, "I'd like to meet him. Don't forget, Paul, that there's another killing which has finally been laid, at least by inference, at Hendricks door. He had something to do with Boyko's killing of Tommy. I'd swear to that."

"It ticks off logically enough," Paul admitted.

THE telephone rang, then, and Paul frowned.

"Dammit," he said. "Just a minute."

I waited while he went into the hall. I could hear his voice, a moment later.

"What the hell," he protested. "I still haven't gotten enough sleep to last an owl. You can get someone else. Oh, hell. All right. Yeah, I'll be right down. All right. Goodbye."

He came back in to the living room cursing roundly.

"The paper," he explained. "Can't get along without Paul Tobin. Good old Paul doesn't need any sleep. Good old Paul'll work twenty-four hours a day. Damn their hides!"

"Special stuff?" I asked.

He nodded. "Industrial tycoon just arrived in town. I'm the guy who interviewed him last time, scored a beat. He wouldn't talk to any of the other newsboys. The *Journal* thinks the old guy must love me, so I've gotta get an exclusive gab-fest with him again."

"The price of charm," I said.

He made a face and said an impolite four-letter word.

"I won't be long," he promised. "You amuse yourself until I get back. Then maybe we'll have a few ideas to kick around."

Tobin dressed quickly, and a little later waved briefly to me as he stepped out the door.

"Hang on," he said, "I won't be so very long."

For a little while after Paul had gone, I tried to do as he'd suggested. But I wound up walking aimlessly around the apartment, chain-smoking cigarettes and trying to keep my mind from racing in the viciously circled grooves that got me nowhere.

I turned on the radio, I picked up ash trays and put them down, I fiddled with paper knives, I read all the titles on all the books in Paul's shelves. Then I wandered into his work den—a small alcove off the living room where he had a desk, a couple of comfortable chairs, a typewriter and a mess of newspapers and magazines.

It was then that I saw his clipping file cabinet and, for want of something better to do, started poking through it.

The file cabinet proved to be a miniature newspaper morgue. It contained what seemed to be most of the stories Paul had written during his half dozen and more years as a reporter for the *Journal*.

It provided plenty of interesting reading, and a lot of dull stuff such as the tycoon interviewing type of thing he was out on at the moment. What was somewhat surprising to me was that Paul should keep such a file as meticulously as this one. Each story was carefully clipped, pasted to a card, and the date and edition of the paper in which it had appeared typed directly above it. It didn't seem that Paul's easy-going, affable, almost sloppy characteristics fitted the sort of a business-like man who'd keep such a personal record system. But, of course, Paul was a hell of a lot smarter than his outward characteristics indicated, and the ultimate sense in having such a thorough record for himself might very reasonably occur to him. He was the sort who'd very often be too impatient to turn to the more extensive files of his own paper's morgue when he was in a hurry on something. And all of this could, some day, be conceivably worked into books or magazine articles. It provided an excellent record of the history of a working newspaperman in a big town.

There were lead stories. Big, important yarns, some full of drama prominently splashed into type. And there were the obscure little yarns without by-lines and comparatively insignificant.

There were two stories, dated April sixth, one with Paul's by-line and the other without it, but both obviously written by him. The by-lined yarn concerned the arrival of a prominent

English diplomat in town. It had been given a two column spread, and Paul had interviewed the dignitary. The other was a small squib concerning the body of an unidentified man, obviously a suicide, who'd been found in the Chicago river that day.

What had caught my attention about them was, of course, the dates on which they'd been written. Tommy Christopher had been killed on the sixth. And I was shoving the clippings back in the file, trying not to think of the kid bleeding out his life in an alley, when the apartment bell-buzzer sounded.

For a moment it startled me. And then I shut the file and left the alcove, moving slowly to the answering buzzer in the hallway.

I hesitated only a moment before pressing the buzzer that would admit the ringer downstairs. After all, it wasn't my apartment, and I didn't like to take the responsibility.

It was most probable that it was merely Paul, back from his assignment and finding himself without his key, which I'd noticed he'd forgetfully left on the mantel of the fireplace. What a memory!

I waited at the door, after I'd pressed the buzzer. The footsteps moving up the stairs sounded like Paul's light tread. But the person who appeared on the landing a moment later wasn't Paul Tobin.

It was Nick Alex, the sleek, well-tailored little hoodlum.

He had a gun in his hand, a .45 Army automatic. He was smiling very happily, and the pupils of his eyes were pin-points, the way only an overdose of dope can make them.

He paused and sucked in his breath, still smiling.

"Hello, Johnny Christopher," he said.

CHAPTER XII

THERE was a moment that was like eternity while I stared at the hopped-up little hoodlum. The gun in his hand was exceptionally steady. There's something about hop that gives a steady sort of madness to the man who's filled with it. Not like the wobbles that hooch hands out.

"Hello Alex," I said slowly. "You've really gotten stuffed with the snow."

His smile didn't disappear at all. But something flickered in his eyes. Something you see flickeringly in the eyes of a snake as it whirrs in the brush.

"You don't talk nice, Johnny Christopher," he said.

He moved toward me slowly, and I backed away from the door at the same rate, keeping my eyes fixed on that gun. Then he was standing inside the door and softly closing it behind him, one hand on the knob behind his back, the other still clutching the gun.

"I hear you've been snooping around," he said quietly.

I tried to brass it out.

"Put that thing away," I said, nodding at the .45. "It makes too much noise."

He giggled. "It's gonna make plenty noise in just a minute."

"Put it away," I repeated, inching a step toward him.

"Uh-uh!" He brought the gun up sharply. "No funny stuff. Nicky Alex doesn't like funny stuff." Then he giggled again. "Funny how your own rod should give you the sweats."

"My own rod, Nick?"

"Yeah," he was still smiling. "Yeah. Your own rod. Government stuff."

"The police have the .45 I owned," I said. "It was used to kill Dinty Kerrigan. How'd you know Dinty was killed with a .45, or that I owned one?"

"I've listened to too many questions

already," Alex said. "Put those paws high and turn around."

I hesitated, then turned slowly, raising my arms above my head.

"Okay," Alex declared. "March your way to the bathroom."

I hesitated, and the .45 was suddenly sharp and nudging in my back.

"The bathroom," Alex repeated. "Guns don't make so much noise in the bathroom. You get all the faucets going, and maybe the shower. And it don't make near so much noise because there's tile walls, usually, too."

"I found Dinty Kerrigan in my bathroom in the hotel, Alex," I said. "Maybe you had something to do with that."

"Maybe you talk too loud," Alex said, driving the gun more sharply into my back. "Get moving."

I started toward the bathroom, and the pressure of the gun in my back was suddenly lessened. But I could practically feel Alex's breath on my neck as he followed behind me.

"Maybe you also know a guy named Boyko," I said.

"Maybe I'm ignorant and don't know a thing," he giggled. "Keep moving."

We turned down a short hallway. The bathroom was at the end. The door was shut. I hesitated.

"Okay—" Alex began.

"All right, Alex!" a voice behind us said sharply.

I couldn't see Alex in the instant after the voice spoke, but I could hear him suddenly shift weight, suddenly start to turn.

I threw myself to the floor and to one side half an instant later. And in that instant the gun roared.

IT wasn't a .45. It wasn't the gun Alex carried. It was a weapon of a smaller caliber; and as I lifted my head I saw Paul Tobin standing at the

end of the hallway, holding a compact little revolver in his hand and staring down at the still twitching body of Nick Alex.

"Paul!" I yelled, scrambling to my feet. "Good God, fellow! Talk about timing!"

Tobin was staring at Alex. There was a crimson splash where his right eye had been, and he was now lying motionless, his blood slowly staining the green and white carpet.

"Talk about damned fools," Tobin said sardonically, "who answer doorbells for strangers." He was still staring at Alex. "Especially strangers who come bearing guns."

My hands were shaking, and I was reaching for a cigarette.

Tobin slowly put the revolver into his pocket.

"I think I need a scotch, triple," he said. "I'll fix you one, too. I'll be in the living room."

Then he turned and left the hallway entrance.

I'd found my cigarette, and had it lighted. I stopped a moment beside Alex's body. Then I bent down and turned him fully face up. I did a quick, expert job, then, of frisking him.

It took just a minute, then I put his wallet and change and usual incidentals back where I'd found them. In my hand was his .45, a small box of slugs for the gun, and a torn half page of newspaper.

A quick glance at the half page, once I'd unfolded it, showed me it was from the *Journal*, April 6th bulldog edition. It was the half page on which the story of Tommy's death was columned. Down in the right hand corner, circled in pencil, was a story I'd seen just ten or fifteen minutes previously, when I'd been going through Paul Tobin's clipping file. It was the agate type yarn on the discovery of an unidentified body

floating in the Chicago river.

I straightened up, and something clicked in my mind.

I folded the torn half page quickly, stuffed it in my pocket. Then I looked at the automatic in my hand.

From the .45 I ejected the cartridge clip, quickly sliding the rounds of ammunition into my palm. There were six rounds, each a dud. I snapped back the slide, ejecting a seventh round from the chamber. It, too, was a dud.

I examined the rounds in the cartridge box I'd taken from the body. They were good ammunition. I filled the clip with half a dozen rounds, chambered a seventh, dropped the cartridge box and the bad rounds into my pocket.

"What're you doing in there," I heard Paul's voice call out, "holding a post mortem?"

I dropped the .45 in my pocket, stepped around Nick Alex's body.

"Coming," I shouted. "You have that drink ready?"

Paul was standing by the mantel of the fireplace, a glass in his hand, a cigarette drooping from his mouth, when I entered the living room.

"There's your drink." He pointed to a coffee table.

I took my drink, sat down on the couch.

"This'll help," I said. "Now that this thing has come to a neat little climax, I'm ashamed of my nerves."

"Well get a grip on them, chum," said Paul. "It's not quite over yet."

I took a deep drink. "What's it figure out to?"

"Hendricks," Paul said. "I've located him. I told you I was going out on an interview. That was the bunk. I didn't want you to get worked up, too hopeful. I had information. Now it's paid off and I've located Hendricks."

"But Nick Alex—" I began.

"Now you know where he fits into Hendricks' organization," Tobin said simply. "Trigger man. Handled Hendricks' dirty stuff—such as the job he was about to do on you."

"Then Hendricks sent him here?"

Paul Tobin grinned wryly. "What do you think?"

I finished off the rest of my drink in a gulp.

"Where is Hendricks now?"

"Nick Alex owned a country cabin a few miles out of town. Hendricks is holed up there now, probably waiting for Alex to arrive," Tobin said. He finished off his drink, put the glass on the mantel. "You and I, chum, are going to give him a little surprise."

I stood up.

"Will Hendricks be alone?"

Tobin gave a characteristic loose-shouldered shrug.

"Alex had buddies, rough buddies. Maybe they're on hand."

"I took Nick's .45 from him," I said. "He won't mind."

Paul grinned. "Good. I was just going to suggest that. I've got my little lady"—he patted the small revolver in his pocket—"all set to help again."

I stood up. "We'd better get going."

"I looked into Alex's coupe," Paul said. "He had it parked outside—which tipped me to hurry like hell up here—with the keys still in the ignition. We can use his gas to get to Hendricks."

I gestured toward the hall. "What about the body?"

"One corpse, more or less," he said. "We'll have the bluecoats remove it later."

I followed Tobin out of the apartment. As he closed the door behind us he paused a moment, stuck his head back inside, and murmured:

"Make yourself comfortable, Nicky."

THE SHINY red coupe that had been Nick Alex's was parked almost directly in front of Paul Tobin's apartment building. It wasn't locked, of course, and as Paul had said, the keys were still in the ignition.

"Looks like Nicky didn't plan on staying long," I remarked.

"It wasn't a very social call," Tobin said, sliding in behind the wheel.

I got in the other side.

"Alex's country cabin is northwest," Tobin said. "It shouldn't take us long."

We were out on the Outer Drive a few minutes later, Tobin driving with graceful, casual breakneck speed.

"We can follow through to Evanston, then take the Skokie Road," he observed. "Quickest route I can think of."

"If you don't mind, I'm curious to know how the hell you got the lead on this."

Tobin laughed. "Little Paul has ears all over town. The ears can tell him lots when he wants to ask questions around. I told you that Alex had a definite tie-in of some sort with Hendricks."

"Hendricks told me that himself, but he made it sound purely political."

"It was in a way," Paul said. "Remember how astonished you were when I told you Nick Alex had been taken back into favor with the people of your nationality in Hendricks' ward?"

"Yes, and I still can't believe it."

Tobin smiled. "It isn't so hard to figure out when you start from the beginning. Some time ago I covered a routine police case in which the body of a middle aged, unidentified man, was found floating around in the waters of the Chicago River's west bend."

I thought suddenly of the torn half page from the *Journal* in my pocket.

"Sure," I said quietly. "One of those

routine suicide things, eh?"

"As far as anybody knew," Tobin answered. "In cases like that, when a body's been soaking for days, recognition is pretty well impossible. Of course, no one stepped up to claim the corpse. There was the usual potter's burial, and that was that. No one ever gave a tumble as to who the guy was."

"And did you?" I asked.

Tobin slowed the coupe as we made the turn at Foster.

"Not immediately," he said. "Not for a hell of a long time. But one thing made me curious. I was in the morgue the morning after the corpse was found. I saw Nick Alex there."

"Alex?"

"Looking over the body," Tobin said. "He was very casual about it, said he wanted to make sure it wasn't a cousin of his who had disappeared a month or two back. And then he left. Of course he said it wasn't his cousin."

"I still don't get it," I said.

"Give me time," Paul grinned. "Well, after this body was found—"

"When was that?" I broke in.

"March, I think," he said casually.

"Yeah, latter part of March, it was."

I lighted a cigarette. "Yeah, go on."

"After this body was found," he continued, "I did a little looking into Alex. Not much, for I didn't have a hell of a lot of reason to be suspicious. But that's what led me to finding out that Nick Alex had been unreasonably back in the good graces of the respectable citizens of his nationality. Like you, I was quietly astonished. It just didn't jibe. I wondered why. It didn't take a hell of a long time to find out."

HE PAUSED to light a cigarette. We passed Howard Street and entered Evanston.

"You've heard of the Greek underground movement, of course," he said.

"Of course."

"It isn't an official movement in the States here, not like Greek War Relief and some of the other agencies," Tobin said. "Its representatives, what few there are, have to work quietly in collecting money to further the work of the movement in Greece. It has to be quiet because no one can afford to let the Axis know who its agents are. It might result in trouble for the agents still working in Greece."

"But what would Alex have to do with any patriotic, decent—" I began.

Paul cut me off.

"The Greek underground agents circulate quietly among the affluent and patriotic Greek Americans," he went on. "They carry credentials that make their identification unquestionable. All your people, particularly those who still have relatives over there, do their damndest to contribute what they can. Even many of the not so affluent give their little bit to the fund. The collections are more than enormous at times. But the collectors, of course, never touch a penny of it. They carry it back to put it to use in the cause. Think, however, what a hell of a good racket a thing like that would look to be to a rat of Nick Alex's caliber."

"But you said that credentials are—" I started.

We were moving west through suburban Evanston. Paul had slowed considerably and we were now moving at something less than breakneck speed.

"I said the credentials they carry make identification quite unquestionable," he broke in. "Anyone who carries the proper credentials is accepted as genuine. Even Nick Alex."

"He got them?" I demanded.

"From the guy he dumped in the river. From the guy he bumped off, the unidentified body in the morgue. That fellow was an accredited agent.

Alex didn't give him time to begin; he got to him, killed him, took the credentials from his body, stripped all other identification from him and dumped the body in the river."

"But the name on the credentials," I said, "would—"

Paul cut in once more.

"Would have to be altered, and was," he said. "So Nick Alex went among your people with the phony credentials, making enormous collections."

"But where does Hendricks fit in?" I demanded.

"I'm coming to that. Hendricks is no fool. He knows what goes on in his political reservation better than the people who live there. He did a little looking around, strictly on his own. He found out Alex's angle. Naturally, he wanted to be cut in."

"And Alex let him?"

"What could he do? Hendricks had enough on him to fry him. He threatened to turn him in. Hendricks was bigger stuff than Nick Alex. Nick had to throw in with him. And with Alex's new-born popularity among a certain group of the voters, Hendricks found him valuable as hell politically, as well."

"And how did that lead to my brother Tommy's getting it?"

Paul looked serious. "Tommy got wind of it all," he said, "somehow."

"But—" I began.

WE WERE on the Skokie Road, now, and Tobin turned north.

"Tommy was working for Hendricks. He might have overheard the deal being discussed at one time or another between Alex and Hendricks. He went to Hendricks—"

"Tommy did?" I interrupted.

Paul nodded. "Tommy went to Hendricks crazy mad. The kid said that Hendricks was going to restore the

money to his people, or turn it over to the actual representatives of the underground, or he'd blow everything wide open."

"And what did Hendricks do?"

"Laughed him out of his office, told him he was reading too many penny-dreadfuls. Told him to run home and be a good boy. Then the kid went to Dinty Kerrigan."

"Why to Dinty?"

"The kid worshipped Dinty. Dinty was like a father to him after you left, Johnny. He saw to it that the kid kept clean of any political dirty stuff, helped him out in a thousand ways. He knew that Dinty was the only one he had left to turn to."

"But why," I began, "didn't Kerrigan—"

"Dinty was an older, wiser head than Tommy. But he was cautious, too cautious. And he had a wife and kids to support. He didn't know what could be done without positive proof. And then, that night, Tommy was killed."

I flicked my cigarette out of the window.

"Murdered," I corrected him.

"That's right," Paul nodded. "Murdered. Alex hired a young hobo who looked a lot like Tommy to stick up a store. He timed things so that he sent Tommy on an errand which would take him through that alley where he was killed a few moments after the young hobo ran from the scene of the crime. The hobo took off in one direction, the cop, Boyko, ran into the alley, where he'd been told Tommy would be. He shot the kid dead. The frightened grocery store owner, not having had a good look at the young bum who resembled Tommy vaguely, was willing to agree—on seeing Tommy's body—that Tommy had done the stick-up job."

"And shortly afterward Boyko retired in comfort," I said.

"On dough supplied him by Hendricks and Alex," Tobin said. He grimaced. "You can see what happened to poor old Dinty's nerve when he learned what happened to Tommy. It was all so slick he didn't dare to open his mouth. He knew it was far too big for him to buck. He didn't want to have any 'accidents' happen to him. He had a family to think of, and he clammed up shut."

"He was that way when I talked to him," I agreed.

"He was surprised as hell at your return," Tobin said. "He stalled you off. But after you'd gone, he found courage in the fact that he now wasn't alone against the thing. He felt he could tell you what he knew, and at the same time rid himself of some of the shame he undoubtedly felt at having played possum so long. When he went to your hotel he found Alex there, waiting for you. Alex knew what Kerrigan was going to do. He eliminated him then and there, left him in your tub."

"But why was Alex waiting for me?"

"He was worried. He wanted to find out what you were after. You'd been all over the old neighborhood all morning, talking to everyone. You were looking up back newspaper stories. You were getting on the trail. Kerrigan's arrival told him what you were after. He couldn't afford to let Kerrigan talk. He was under orders from Hendricks to do what was necessary. Hendricks was clever. He was letting Alex handle all the trigger work."

I nodded. We were in the country, now, woods on either side of us, an occasional clearing, an occasional roadhouse.

"And Alex had used my gun to do the job, eh?"

Paul nodded. "He'd probably been

frisking your room, just to make sure of things, when he found your gun. When it came time to eliminate Kerrigan it seemed very bright to him, I suppose, to use your .45 for the job. Maybe he thought it would snarl you up in the murder to the point where you have to drop the trail leading to Hendricks and him."

"And then there was Boyko. How do you figure that?"

Paul shrugged.

"Hendricks undoubtedly knew you'd get to Boyko. Maybe he even knew you'd been inquiring around for his address. Boyko was a strictly weak link. A quarrelsome, inveterate drunkard ever since he shot Tommy. Soft, sloppy, maybe getting harder and harder to keep in line. Maybe Boyko was bleating for more money. He was running through what he'd been given plenty fast. Races, booze, women."

"Yeah," I nodded, "plenty of possible reasons, all of them good. But our chronology is a little out of order. What about Madge? Why did she call me? Why was she killed?"

Paul looked thoughtful. "I'd say that Hendricks told her you were in town, Johnny. I'd be guessing at this part, but she was a smart girl. Maybe she'd found out about Tommy's murder—that it had really been murder. Her life with Hendricks was hell, from what I hear. Maybe she suspected all along, and wanted to tell you what she suspected. Hendricks never let her get to you, at any rate. She never told what she knew, or suspected to anyone."

WE SLOWED down, now, to almost a complete stop. Then I saw the rutted road leading off the highway into the woods.

"This is it," Tobin said. "The cabin is back about half a mile, maybe farther, in the woods."

"And Hendricks is there?"

"He's there," Tobin said positively.

"Your ears, as you call them, gathered a lot of information for you, Paul."

Tobin nodded abstractedly.

"We'll park in the clearing behind the cabin," he said. "I'll go in first. For God's sake, sit tight until I give you the word. Stay right in the car."

The road was turning, now, and I could see a small cabin-type cottage a few hundred yards away. It was set back in the trees, darkened and apparently deserted.

"You want me to sit tight, eh?"

Paul nodded. "By all means. I'll signal you. We've got to play this smart."

The road turned, and we lost sight of the cabin. Then it was again in view, only this time we were behind it, moving off the road into a tiny clearing half a hundred yards away.

We stopped, and Tobin turned off the ignition with a decisive gesture of his wrist.

"This is it," he said, his voice almost a whisper. "Now don't forget. I know what I'm doing. I'll go in. Then you follow."

"How about my going first?" I asked quietly.

"Don't be a damned fool," he snapped irritably. "You want to wave a red flag at them? There might be others than Hendricks, you know." He opened the door. "They won't know what in the hell to make of my walking in on 'em."

He got out of the car, shutting the door.

"Keep put," he said. "I'll signal."

I watched him move off toward the cabin, walking easily, noiselessly. He headed for the rear of the cabin. There was a back door, which he evidently intended to use for entrance.

HE WAS at the door. I took a deep breath, put my hand on the handle of the car door. He had not yet drawn his revolver, but now I saw him remove it smoothly from his pocket, holding it ready with one hand while he opened the door with the other.

I said a silent prayer that I hadn't waited to long, as I saw him step into the cabin. When the door closed behind him, I opened the car door and leaped out.

For a moment, due to the slow reaction of my game leg, I almost stumbled headlong. Then I'd regained my balance and was moving as quickly as I could toward the cabin.

The .45 was cool and smooth and comforting in my hand. I couldn't hear any voices from inside the cabin, but I hadn't expected to.

Then, suddenly, I heard Tobin's voice cry out:

"Okay, Johnny. Come on!"

I was less than twenty feet from the cabin, then, and the door opened suddenly to reveal Tobin standing there, revolver in hand.

Then I was up the steps, and he stood aside to let me pass. As I entered the room I saw it was a rude sort of kitchen, semi-darkened because the tattered shades had been drawn. There was a table, several chairs, a pump sink.

I was several feet into the room before I saw Hendricks. The door closed behind us, then, and Tobin suddenly threw the light switch, illuminating the room with almost blindingly sudden brilliance.

Hendricks was in the far corner, by the pump sink. He was gagged, and bound to one of the rude wooden chairs. His hair was unkempt, his head bruised and bloodied at the temple. The gag bit deep into his mouth, and he stared at me with eyes that were wild.

"Here he is Johnny," Tobin said quietly. "He's been waiting for some time for you. I told him you were coming here to complete the scene."

I turned, then, very slowly, to face Paul Tobin.

He was smiling in that happy, crooked, boyish grin of his, and his revolver was not trained on Hendricks, but on me.

"It's going to be very simple, Johnny," he said. "The police will find your body here, with Hendricks. It will look grand. The war veteran, still psycho-neurotic, comes home to find his hated rival had married the girl he loves. His twisted mind—that's you, Johnny—plots revenge. He runs rampage. He kills two of his rival's employees, Nick Alex and Dinty Kerrigan. He kills the girl who married his rival, then he kills a policeman who shot his brother in the line of duty. The twisted mind, Johnny, your mind, Johnny, thinks Boyko was a murderer in killing Tommy. He gets revenge on him, too. Then he kills his rival, maybe after torturing him here—and finally turns the gun on himself, after writing a full confession."

I still had the .45 in my hand. Instinctively, I raised it.

Paul Tobin laughed briefly.

"Don't be funny, Johnny Christopher. That gun isn't worth a damn. I loaded it, personally, before I gave it to Alex. The rounds in the magazine are duds. Think of some prayers, Johnny. Maybe some prayers you learned in battle. And say 'em fast, Johnny."

CHAPTER XIII

MY EYES were still fixed on the gun in Tobin's hand. And when I spoke, I kept my eyes there.

"This isn't a surprise, Paul," I said

slowly. "Not the least bit of a small one. I knew from the moments that followed Nick Alex's death that your hands were bloody. You remember telling me you weren't in town when Tommy was killed?"

"Sounds fascinating," Tobin said dryly, still smiling. "Do go on."

"You weren't in town, or so you claimed, but your by-line was on a story in the same edition as the one that carried the story of Tommy's death. A local interview, remember? And you admitted to covering a suicide story that also appeared in the *Journal* the same day that the story of Tommy's killing appeared there. You had to be in town. Yet you deliberately lied on that score, not figuring such a simple thing would trip you up."

Tobin bowed faintly in mock apology.

"A detail I overlooked," he said. "But I can't see that it makes any difference now."

"You also did a hell of a lot of glib talking coming out here, Tobin," I said. "You had 'sources' of information that filled out the entire pattern of the murders perfectly for you. They must have been damned fine sources. Sources that came from your own knowledge, since you, and not Hendricks, were the killer and consequently knew the pattern perfectly. You're smart, Paul, but not that clever. No one but the killer could tie them all together that neatly."

Again Tobin made a mock half bow. "Sorry I couldn't leave the impression with you that I'm a hell of a smart guy."

"And when you figured out this final frame-up," I said, "you sent Alex up to your apartment, coked-up to kill me, but knowing that he wouldn't, because you'd loaded his gun. It was easy, then, to time it so you could step in and 'rescue' me from Alex. And it made it easy to eliminate Alex so what he knew

as your confederate wouldn't ever come to light."

Tobin nodded. "Bright boy, Johnny. That 'rescue' from Alex was to give you confidence—as it evidently did—in my completely boyish innocence. I could get you out here without your ever suspecting what I had in store. After all, you'd naturally think the killer wouldn't save your life so dramatically."

"It's a damned safe bet, too, that the story you told me coming out here was basically correct, except that you were the one who went to Alex for the cut-in on his graft. You became the brains of his outfit after you discovered his racket. You and not Hendricks. Substituting your name for Hendricks in that story, it's substantially correct."

"Not only substantially—positively," Tobin smirked.

I was still watching the gun in his hand as I spoke.

"Why did you have to kill Madge?" I demanded.

"Ah yes. That's a loose end I neglected to mention, isn't it? I couldn't very well have mentioned it, and kept Hendricks the villain of the piece. You see, poor Hendricks over there has been contributing heavily to me for several years — ever since I learned that his father died in a penitentiary some ten years ago. He'd kept his jail-bird father's past completely secret for a long time. It would have been suicidal, politically, if it were to be brought up. A man of poor Hendricks' political stature cannot afford to have the voters know that his father was a criminal. When I discovered it, he paid well. There was nothing else he could do. He paid well and eventually gave Nick Alex a nominal job in his organization, on my orders. Getting Alex in with Hendricks helped our—ah—collection business."

"And Madge found out?"

"Eventually she did. Madge, as I

remarked once, was smart. She was bound to discover, sooner or later, that her husband was paying out heavy blackmail. When she called you in your room at the hotel the day Kerri-gan was killed there, it was on an anonymous tip I telephoned to her. But, of course, she was told that you were threatening to kill Hendricks. That's why she said she had to see you. She wanted to reason with you."

TOBIN had paused to glance at Hendricks, then he smiled faintly and continued.

"I called Madge after I knew she'd have time to telephone you. I wanted her call to you at the hotel to go on record. Then I told her that I had to see her immediately, that it was about Hendricks. She'd come to see me several weeks before, saying that she knew of the blackmail and begging me to agree on a final settlement so that I wouldn't as she put it, bleed him to death.

"She met me, instead of you. We went for a drive. From the end of that ride, at the stone quarry, she was no longer any trouble."

"And you think now, that it's all tied up neatly, and that you're clear?" I asked.

"I'm tired of this chit-chat," Tobin said. The smile left his face. He took several steps toward me. "I'm clear, you're damned right. And this is the end of the road, Johnny. I don't like this job, for, believe it or not, I always rather liked you. You can close your eyes, if you like, for you're going to get it now, at close range. It's too damned bad that it has to be like this—but I like myself better than anyone else."

"Drop that gun, Paul," I told him. "I can use one of these better than you."

"Don't be a sap," he said, "that pop-gun's useless."

"I reloaded it," I said, and for a mo-

ment shifted my gaze from the gun to his eyes. There was a moment in which frightened doubt flickered there, then convulsive conviction.

I didn't wait. I threw myself to one side, firing from almost point blank range, from the hip, foxhole combat style.

One shot echoed from his gun on the heels of the three that barked from the .45 in my hand. And then I was on the floor, my shoulder aching from the impact, rolling over to avoid any after-convulsion of his trigger finger.

But there wasn't any after convulsion.

The gun fell slowly from his fingers as they spread open helplessly. His

eyes were very wide and filled with a wonderment that was quickly turning to a glassy sheen. On his mouth there was an expression of strangely sardonic surprise.

His knees began to crumple. Slowly at first, then more rapidly until he was kneeling on the floor for half an instant, his open fingers clutching helplessly at his stomach. Then he fell forward to his face.

I climbed to my feet and, standing there above him, knew that I was looking down at death. I turned away, curiously conscious that the sound of death was somehow gone at last.

Gone at last, for good. . . .

THE END



FINGERPRINT FACTS



FINGERPRINTS are the result of the oily secretions from the tiny pores which completely cover the fingertips and palm. Some persons have a greater excretion of sweat than others. The fear of detection experienced by a person in the act of committing a crime will cause a greater excretion from the sweat glands than a person who has nothing worrying him. The physical and mental condition of an individual greatly influences the ease by which his fingerprints may be left. A young person perspires more freely than an elderly person; his accidental fingerprints will be clearer.

It is just about impossible for any expert to distinguish whether a certain print was left by a man, woman, or child, because some men have very fine ridges in their fingers and some women have very coarse ridges. This also applies to the child's print.

The general rule detectives follow in searching the scene of a crime for fingerprints takes them from the point of entry to the safe or place that was robbed, and back to the place of exit. Any article which may have caught the criminal's eye between these two or three points is examined very carefully.

Powders and Iodine fumes are used to make the print clearly visible to the naked eye. As soon as possible photographs are taken to preserve the print for an indefinite period of time. By means of a silver nitrate process, fingerprint impressions have been developed as long as six months to a year after they had been left.

Criminals often attempt to mask their identity by wearing gloves. But even when the robber or

murderer is known to have worn gloves, the scene of his crime is inspected very carefully for prints. The thief is usually forced to remove his gloves at some time during the performance of the crime. Fearing detection, he works in the dark or in the dim glow of a flashlight, which makes it necessary for him to rely on his sense of touch. With gloves on, that sense is impaired, and often in desperation the criminal will slip a glove off and feel whatever he is after—making that one fatal step.

Once found, fingerprints are treated with the same delicate care that rare gems receive. One case involving a double murder was solved when several good palm prints were found on the rear tire cover of an automobile which the murderers had stolen. On close examination it was found that these prints were made visible by dust particles. As the murderers were riding and planning their getaway, the dust of the roads developed the latent palm impressions on the cover. A sharp knife was used to cut the tire cover around the impressions and this piece was tacked on a board. A wooden frame was built around the outside of the piece that had been cut out of the tire cover, and a board was placed over it and tacked down. Having photographed the prints, they were compared with many other palm prints of suspects until the proper identification was made. More than thirty-five points of comparison were found to prove that the prints belonged to this one suspect.

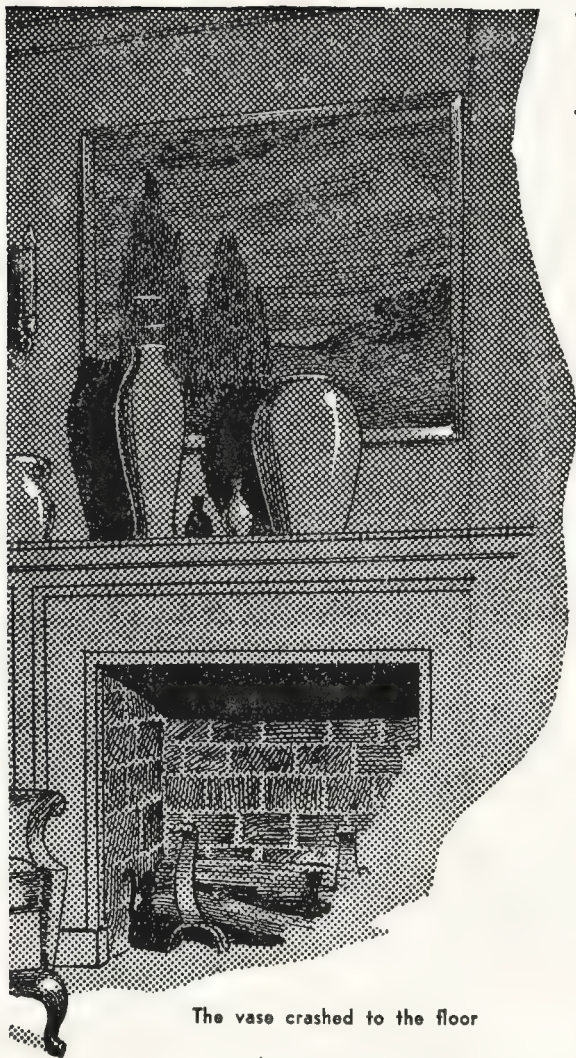
The patience with which the investigator pursues an elusive fingerprint is matched only by the intensity of his hunt for the criminal, once identified.—*Leslie Anderson.*



JEFF Baker's job was private investigator, but there seemed to be something about this contract that cost money

Murder Pays the Tariff

By Philip Sharp



The vase crashed to the floor

JEFF BAKER, private investigator, sat in his habitual pose of utterly relaxed reflection, both legs on the desk with the end of his spine near the edge of the chair. It was apparent that he wasn't too happy about the letter he was reading. His secretary—more properly, his girl of all work—Jan Craig, watched him with a look that was a dead giveaway to her feelings. It was obvious that Jeff was the center of her universe—obvious, that is, to everyone but Jeff.

"Well?" she said at last. "I can see by your lengthening face that it's bad

news. How bad?"

"The worst," he said, as with one motion he tossed the letter to her and sat upright in the chair. "I thought I was a cinch to get the contract." He smiled wryly. "They think my organization is too small to handle their work. What do they suppose I need to investigate a man who is being bonded? The FBI? Those dumb clucks—"

She looked up from the letter. "You can't blame them too much, Jeff. They're looking for a front—a little dash and style and you'll have to admit this office isn't exactly plush and satin. In fact, it comes as close to being a rat hole as anything short of a rat hole."

He looked thoughtfully around at the shabby office as though he were seeing it for the first time. It was true. A few pieces of knocked-out office furniture, a typewriter that rightfully belonged in the Smithsonian Institution and an unobstructed view of the alley from one small window. The only thing worth looking at in the office was Jan Craig, but Jeff was blind to everything but the urgency of the moment.

Jan leaned over the desk and put her hand on Jeff's. "You're such a swell guy, Jeff, that I hate to see you beating out your brains for nothing."

"How do you mean?" he asked.

She made an abrupt gesture that could have meant anything. "I mean

give up this crazy idea of getting contracts with bonding companies for investigation. Even if you could get the work—and you haven't been a howling success at it so far—you would find the routine and detail driving you crazy. You could get plenty of cases if you would accept them," she added meaningfully.

He shook his head. "I've told you a dozen times, Jan, that I don't want any part of muscle and gun work. I won't take a case that involves my doing things that are properly for the police. I'm tired of getting slugged and being shot at. I want a mild easy life, free from people who don't like me. Isn't that clear?"

"It's clear enough," Jan said, "and I almost understand how you feel. But is this better? Being hounded for small bills, no business at all—owing rent on even a dive like this? Honestly, if I didn't know better I might think you were yellow. Everybody knows your record. With all the publicity you got for your chestful of medals you're a cinch to get as much work as you can handle; but no, you want nice cushy investigating jobs without any risks. I tell you it can't be done, Jeff. Not in this business, anyway."

Baker shook his head. "It's no use, Jan. I'm no Rover boy. I want a legitimate business where I can go to sleep every night without worrying about some character putting a knife in my ribs."

She sniffed. "If it doesn't worry you to sleep in the park, I'm just as happy."

He grinned. "It isn't quite that bad—yet. But how about you? You don't have to take this with me. Why don't you pull out, Jan. You're an attractive girl—smart, too."

"I hadn't supposed you ever noticed."

He looked surprised. "Of course you're smart. I've always known that."

"Let it go," she said. "I'll sink with the ship. If nothing else, my curiosity will keep me here. I've gotten used to not being paid. I'll see if I can get used to not eating."

THEY hadn't noticed the man come in. His figure suddenly blotted out the light from the small window. Jeff looked up at the same time as Jan. He was standing there, a short square man. Everything about him was square, from the cut of his dark suit, a square bow-tie, to his square-toed shoes. Only a derby, perched on his square head, failed to fill out the picture of his angularity.

"You Jeff Baker?" His voice was a whisper. Without cadence or intonation. A machinelike dispassionate whisper.

"Yes, but I don't believe I—"

"Never mind about me, bud. I got a few words for you—about your health."

Under her breath Jan said, "He's selling insurance."

The square man didn't look at her. "I'm giving you a chance to be smart, bud."

Jeff started to get to his feet. "Look here, I don't know what you're talking about, but—"

That was as far as he got. For almost without moving, it appeared, the square man smashed Jeff on the side of the head, knocking him against the desk where he hung swaying for a moment, then collapsed to the floor.

Jan pressed her hands to her mouth to keep from screaming.

Lying on the floor, fighting the waves of nausea flooding him, Jeff heard the whisper—a deafening whisper, it seemed: "That's just to show you I don't kid. If you want to keep all your teeth, remember what I'm gonna tell you. *When Mrs. Merton comes to see you, tell her it's no soap. Do you get*

it?"

. . . The next thing Jeff remembered clearly was Jan wiping his face with a strangely mottled towel, crooning meaningless phrases over him. He made an effort to rise, then sank back as the retching sickness swept over him again.

He tried to speak, but one side of his face was throbbing with pain and his lips on that side were puffed, blurring his articulation. He finally managed to get out, "Where is he?"

"Oh, Jeff, are you all right?" Her cry was from way down.

"I'm okay." He shook his head to clear it. "Where did the ape go?"

"I don't know. He just melted through the wall."

"Spooky stuff, eh?" He let Jan help him into a chair. His hand went to his face, exploring the lacerations.

"He marked you. How does it feel?" She was swabbing the cuts with alcohol.

He flinched as the raw liquid bit into exposed flesh. "I'm all right. The monkey used brass knucks. He must be a bad boy from way back. It's been a long time since I last saw a pair of knucks. . . . What was the name of that woman?"

"Mrs. Merton, he said. What does it mean, Jeff?"

"I don't know, but I hope it will mean meeting that square meatball again."

She shivered. "I'd just as soon *not* meet him again. There was something so—so methodically brutal about him. You hadn't said a dozen words when he hit you."

"I'm not really worrying about seeing that bozo again. I will—and I hope soon. What I want to know is *who is Mrs. Merton?*"

"Shall I look in the phone book?"

"No, don't bother. There are probably a couple of hundred Mertons in the book. We'll wait . . . And stop

using up all the alcohol. It's hard to get . . . Jan, who do you suppose she is?"

"I don't care *who* she is," said Jan firmly "I'm going to hate her for the company she keeps."

IT WAS several days before the next move was made. Jan was fretting, unable to understand Jeff's calmness.

"For heavens sake, stop sitting there like a—a Buddha. Here I'm just dying of curiosity and you're not turning a hair. Can't you show a little respectable excitement?"

"Excitement? What for? Do you expect this dame to be something out of the Arabian Nights? Come in riding a camel maybe?"

Jan was hardly listening. She had that faraway look she always got when she was thinking or talking about money. "Oh, I know just what Mrs. Merton will look like. She'll be dressed like a million dollars; wearing a king's ransom in jewels, furs sweeping the floor—"

"Beautiful, of course?"

"Distinguished, I'd say. You see, this man has been blackmailing her for years—something she did when she was a girl—and now she is coming to you to free her from the clutches of the ring. There!" said Jan triumphantly. "I'll bet that's just the way it will happen."

Jeff looked at her admiringly. "I don't know how you do it. You've got everything squared off to your own satisfaction. Tell me more."

It was at that moment when the woman came in. She might have been forty-five or fifty; dressed completely in black, she was the sort who would pass unnoticed in any crowd. Her clothes were not very stylish or expensive—just what one might expect from her commonplace appearance. Her calm untroubled face certainly showed

no guilty secret long borne in silence. She looked about the shabby office, then at Jeff.

"Mr. Baker?" she asked. Her voice had a curiously harsh intonation. Jeff puzzled to think where he had heard a voice like it before, then remembered, quite unrelatedly, that it was a theatrical voice, worked over by whiskey and the years.

"I'm Jeff Baker," he said.

The woman looked inquiringly at Jan.

"Miss Craig, my secretary," Jeff said. "Miss . . .?"

"Snyder. Mrs. Snyder. May I sit down?"

"Of course. I'm sorry. Take this chair, won't you?"

Mrs. Snyder smoothed her skirt after she sat down. Her hands, he noticed, were work worn. "Mr. Baker," she said, "I have a job for you that will take all of your time for a few weeks. It may be dangerous; it will not be dull. And you will be very generously paid. Shall I go on?"

Jan got that look on her face. "Certainly, go on!"

JEFF silenced her with his hand. "It sounds like it would be a little out of my line, Mrs. Snyder. I just do routine investigation. Why do you come to me?"

The woman smiled faintly. "Everyone knows your reputation, Mr. Baker. You're an adventurer. A soldier of fortune, I believe they call you."

"When I was younger, maybe, but I'm just a business man now."

Her smile broadened. "You're still young—and I don't think people like you change very much. Do you want to hear the rest of the story?"

"Yes, I'd like to. Naturally, I don't commit myself to taking your case."

"Perhaps the money will change your

mind. A thousand dollars now and five thousand more in a few weeks."

Jan was barely able to restrain herself. Jeff, however, smiled courteously and said, "Go on, Mrs. Snyder."

She plunged into what was obviously a well-rehearsed story.

"I am getting a divorce from my husband. He will be opposed to the idea and doesn't know about it. I am afraid of him. He is a desperate and ruthless man. What I want of you is to protect me until the divorce is final."

Jan broke in, "Why doesn't your husband merely contest the divorce action?"

"He has a terrible fear of publicity. There are reasons—you will know them later."

"A bodyguard, eh?" Jeff considered. "It doesn't sound like it's worth the kind of money you've been talking about, and frankly, Mrs. Snyder, you don't look like you could afford that kind of money."

She pulled out an envelope and handed it to him. There were ten one hundred dollar bills in the envelope. Jan's eyes boggled as Jeff counted the money.

"There," smiled Mrs. Snyder. "Is that right?"

Jeff nodded. She went on: "You see you are too hasty, Mr. Baker. There's the money, and now let me correct another mistake. This fee will be well earned. Make no mistake about it. This isn't an unfounded hysterical fear. My husband is a dangerous man, and he doesn't want this divorce. But he won't dare to contest it if the action is started. Your life, as well as mine, will be in danger until I get the divorce. Do you understand?"

"I understand what you're saying. It just doesn't add up to anything."

"Does the money add up to anything?"

"Yes, I understand that kind of arithmetic."

"Good. Now here's the story—as much as I can tell you now. Tomorrow night you will go to the Majestic Hotel, where a reservation has been made for you under the name of Thomas Reynolds. Your room will adjoin my suite. In three days I have arranged for a chartered plane to take us to Reno. My safety will be your responsibility until the divorce becomes final."

"Mrs. Snyder," said Jeff. "I should have my head examined, but I'm going to take you up. Shouldn't I know a little more? That isn't asking much, considering that I don't know a thing."

"You'll know everything tomorrow night." She got up to go.

"Tomorrow, then." Jeff saw her to the door.

"WELL, smarty," Jan jeered, when he came back. "You see how quick you get in the chips when you take my advice."

"Don't you ever use your noggin for anything but a place to park your hat?" asked Jeff peevishly. "You know I wouldn't touch this stinking thing if it didn't mean a chance to meet that squarehead again."

"Step down, Mr. Baker. You're not going to tell me that *that* was Mrs. Merton under an alias, are you?"

"How do you know it wasn't?"

"Because I saw the initials on her handbag and they were LJS," Jan said, scoring.

"I wondered if you saw that," Jeff said. "Suppose she bought a new bag especially for this visit? But as a matter of fact, she wasn't Mrs. Merton. The story she told, though, was probably Mrs. Merton's."

Jan's eyebrows went up. "Could you give that to me slowly, in elementary

language?"

He explained patiently. "Couldn't you tell that her story was second-hand? Would a woman who professes to be so frightened of her husband be so unemotional about it? Why, she could have been reading that story from a newspaper for all the feeling she put into it. No, it was Mrs. Merton she was talking for—I'll bet on it."

"I think you're right," Jan said excitedly. "But where does Mrs. Snyder fit? When does Mrs. Merton come in? What is it all about, Jeff?"

"I'm a long way from knowing," Jeff said slowly. "Maybe I'll find out all about it at the Majestic Hotel tomorrow."

"Well, tomorrow is a long way off and today is here now. I think I'll go on a mad shopping spree. Give me five weeks' back salary!"

THE next morning while Jeff was shaving, the door-bell started to ring, accompanied by a pounding on the door. It was Jan. She bolted into the room waving a newspaper in the air.

"Jeff, have you seen the paper? How awful! *How awful!*"

"Here, let's have it." He snatched the paper from her as she sank in a chair.

On the front page was a headline, TWO KILLED IN TRAGIC ACCIDENT. "Wealthy society matron and maid plunge to death when their car, for reasons as yet unknown, leaves highway and falls 120 feet to destruction." Underneath the lead were two pictures side by side. One was a very pretty young blonde girl in a laughing, theatrical pose. The other was a dark young girl whom Jeff instantly recognized as Mrs. Snyder as a girl. The story went on: "Mrs. Arthur J. Merton, wife of the well-known art collector and socialite, accompanied by her

maid, Lillian Snyder, was driving her own car into town last night when the tragedy occurred. Mrs. Merton was the former Mona Cole, celebrated Follies girl of fifteen years ago. The two women were lifelong friends, Mrs. Snyder having been a dresser for Mrs. Merton in the theater. Arthur J. Merton was prostrated with grief when the news reached him. He could not be reached for an interview."

"Well?" asked Jan when Jeff looked up.

"So it was *that* Mrs. Merton. Big social stuff. I can't for the life of me figure where that gorilla works in. Now I *am* confused." He puckered his lips thoughtfully.

"Now what? It looks phony, doesn't it?"

"Phony? Listen, baby, it stinks! . . . Jan, go down to the office and wait for me. I'll be in later."

"What are you going to do?"

"Pay a call—a condolence call."

"You're crazy. You'll be arrested for vagrancy if you even show your face in that part of town. He hasn't even seen the newspapers. What makes you think he'll see you?"

Jeff grinned engagingly at her. "I know the magic words that will get me in."

THE Merton estate, in the fashionable part of town, was completely enclosed by a tall iron fence. It seemed a little unusual to Jeff, since all the rest of the estates were flanked by hedges or nothing at all.

He rang the bell at the front gate. After a few minutes, a man who seemed to be a gardener appeared out of nowhere.

"Yes?" he said expressionlessly.

"I want to see Mr. Merton. Will you—"

"Mr. Merton ain't seeing nobody."

The man started to turn away.

"Wait a minute. He'll see me. Take a message to him for me."

The man stopped. "What kind of message?" he asked suspiciously.

"Tell him that Jeff Baker wants to return a retainer his wife gave him yesterday. That's all."

The gardener stood uncertainly. "All right, I'll tell him. But it won't do no good."

He was back in five minutes, unlocking the gate. "Come with me," he said.

"Open sesame."

"What's that?"

"Just some magic words."

They went around the side of the house to a terrace. Large glass doors opened in to a study. The gardener indicated the study and said, "Wait here."

While waiting Jeff looked around. The room was full of vases. Hundreds of them. All shapes and colors. The recessed shelves in the walls, normally for books, were filled with vases. Special racks had been built in the center of the room to accommodate more. He began idly counting them. He was nearly through when the door opened.

A TALL slender man in evening clothes stood in the doorway. There was an air about him of penetrating awareness. His sharp eyes rested on Jeff. When he spoke his voice was musical and beautifully modulated.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting too long, Mr. Baker."

"Not at all. It is I who should apologize for intruding on you at a time like this. I'd like to offer my sympathy."

"Thank you. But there was something else—something you wanted to see me about?" He ended the sentence with a suspended inflection.

"Oh, yes. Your wife came to my office yesterday. She wanted to engage

me in a case and left me a thousand dollar retainer. Now, since I can't earn the fee, I think I should return the money to you."

It seemed to Jeff that Merton suddenly became tense, more watchful.

"What did my wife want of you?" asked Merton, his eyes boring Jeff.

Jeff shrugged. "I don't know. She was pretty secretive about the whole thing. You know how women are. Make a big mystery out of recipes you can find in any cook book—all that sort of thing." He laughed companionably.

"Yes, I know." Merton relaxed slightly. "They are strange creatures. Still, isn't it a little unusual for a retainer to be returned? You know you're legally entitled to keep the money."

"Yes, I know. But it isn't the way I do business. And a thousand bucks is a pretty good-sized orphan."

Merton became more genial. "Mr. Baker, I want you to keep the money. I think I will be using your services soon. In the meantime, suppose we apply it to my account. What do you say?"

"Why, that's swell, Mr. Merton. I'll be glad to adopt the money on that basis." Jeff seemed genuinely grateful. "Say, I was admiring your collection. What kind of glassware is it?"

"It is Holland pottery. And now, Mr. Baker—"

"Do you mind if I take a few minutes looking at it before I go?"

Merton bit his lip. "Not at all. I'll show you around."

They walked from case to case. "I've often wondered, Mr. Merton," said Jeff, "how a man gets started on a hobby. How, for instance, did you ever take up collecting these things? Instead of books or stamps—you know."

"It was when I was abroad, about ten years ago. I was in Amsterdam. A few pieces took my eye and I bought

them. Later, I bought a few more, and before I knew it I was a collector. As simple as that, Mr. Baker."

Jeff couldn't get over it. "Imagine that! And is there any more than what you have here? I mean does the collection go beyond this room?"

"No," said Merton. "I find it more convenient to keep the collection centralized. At present the collection is housed in this room. When it becomes necessary, I'm prepared to knock through the wall."

"I suppose," said Jeff, "that this is one of the most complete collections around."

"It is rather comprehensive," said Merton disinterestedly.

JEFF picked up a large cornucopia vase. "Now this is something even an amateur like me can appreciate. Even I can see—oh! I *am* sorry!" The vase had slipped from his fingers, smashing on the floor where it lay in fragments. "Mr. Merton, I—I don't know what to say."

Merton seemed more irritated than distressed. "That's all right, Baker. Don't think about it. It was an accident."

Jeff wouldn't allow the matter to drop. "But it was so inexcusably clumsy of me. I'd like to pay you for it if—"

"Don't speak of it, I beg you. I can replace it easily enough."

"That's very good of you. I think I'd better go before I pull the house down." He picked up his hat. "By the way, Mr. Merton, a rather strange thing happened a few days ago—maybe it was just a coincidence—but I think you ought to know about it."

Merton inclined his head. "Yes, Mr. Baker?"

"Some mug came into my office and warned me not to take a case from Mrs. Merton."

Merton started a little. The wary look came back. "A mug?"

"Yes. Something straight out of a B movie. A stocky little guy. All angles. Tried to be sinister. Wore a derby. You wouldn't know him?" He was casual.

Merton had himself under control. "Not from your description. Sounds like an amusing fellow."

"I almost died laughing," said Jeff. "A crackpot, I suppose. Your wife's name must have been a coincidence. Well, I'll be going now. Thanks for everything." They shook hands at the front door. "Don't forget to call me when you need me," said Jeff.

"I'll be sure to. Goodbye, Mr. Baker."

Once outside the house, Jeff walked a few yards down the path toward the front gate, then suddenly ducked in to a patch of shrubbery. He followed the line of the shrubbery back to the terrace. Looking around to make sure he wasn't being watched, he ran, crouching, to the french doors. The sound of voices came faintly through the closed doors. By kneeling, he found a place where the curtains didn't quite cover the glass. He could see Merton making quick angry gestures as he talked. He moved to one side and Jeff saw that the square man was with him.

Merton was saying: "This could easily be serious, Kelcy. I shouldn't have listened to you. Baker may know something—or be close to knowing something. You've been unpardonably stupid."

The square man, Kelcy, was defending himself. "He can't know nothing, Chief. The setup is too tight."

Merton whirled on him. "Is that so? How do you explain the fact that my wife saw him yesterday? You idiot! A fine mess! Bungling the simplest job!"

"Did Baker say your wife saw him yesterday?" Kelcy asked wonderingly.

"He certainly did!"

"But she couldn't have. I watched her every minute. I tell you, the guy is pulling a fast one."

"What could he pull? Scaring him off with a warning was your idea. I should have realized that you would only succeed in arousing his curiosity. He suspects something, I know. But there are too many loose ends to tie together. He'll keep. Meanwhile, don't let him see you around. I think you had better go south for a few months. It will be—"

JEFF was craning his neck to see, when some deeply buried atavistic sense warned him of danger. He threw himself to one side just enough to catch a descending blackjack painfully on the shoulder. It was the gardener. Before the man could raise the weapon again, Jeff had leaped to his feet and thrown a quick one-two to the man's body. As he doubled up Jeff let him have a hard right chop to the side of the head. The man fell like a log. The noise of the scuffle had been heard inside, because there was the sound of a chair being overturned and the scurry of feet towards the door.

Jeff was off like a flash for the protective cover of the small tree line that had screened him when he approached the terrace. He had no illusions about what would happen to him if he was caught. Kelcy was a mad dog killer.

The french doors banged open. Voices. They had found the gardener. He wouldn't talk for a while, Jeff thought grimly. He made a run for the street.

A young lady was walking slowly by, reading a book. Jeff fell in with her.

"Excuse me," he said. "But do you think that, lacking the ordinary formal-

ity of an introduction, our lives should be permitted to run their courses without knowing each other?"

The girl looked up from her book. She eyed him coolly. "Are you trying to pick me up?" she asked.

"Perish the thought. Put it from you as unworthy. It was something too strong for me to fight. Believe me, I simply *had* to speak to you."

"You mean it was an uncontrollable impulse?" She was definitely interested now.

"Something like that. Yes."

Her face lit up with animation. "How wonderful! I'm taking Professor DeMuth's course in analytical psychology at the university and I was just reading about such cases. Oh, I'm *so* glad you didn't fight the impulse. It can be so harmful. Why, do you know all sorts of inhibitions are built up by people suppressing desires. That nearly all criminals are products of their—"

"It's a provocative line of thought," Jeff said.

"And so true. Yesterday, in class, Dr. DeMuth was telling us about a man who, until he was married, was—"

"Miss," said Jeff firmly. "I don't think we know each other well enough for me to listen to that sort of thing." They had come abreast of a drug store. "I'm afraid I will have to leave you here. Thanks for the convoy."

He left her staring open-mouthed after him.

He called Jan. "Did you get in?" she wanted to know.

"Never mind that now. There's a phony hookup on this Merton thing. They know now I'm on to them, but they don't know how much I know. In fact, I don't know how much I know. But I've got a hunch I'm going to run down. For the time being, get your beautiful body out of the office and stay out. Go to your mother's; go to your

aunt's; go to the park; go to—"

"Never mind. You've given me enough alternatives. How about you?"

"I'm going to see Joe Gordon at the United States customs office. He owes me a few favors and he'll never have a better chance to pay off."

A taxi took him to the customs where, after a few minutes wrangling with a reluctant Joe Gordon, and an hour's dusty work digging in the files, he had the information he was looking for.

He hurried to his apartment in high elation. He showered and changed clothes, then started digging down in his trunk. Two long unused pistols came to light. One, a Colt .38, he slipped in his coat pocket after examining the clip. The other was an unbelievably small French .25 calibre. This he carefully checked to make sure a cartridge was in the chamber before he put it in to a special loopshoulder holster made of parachute silk. The pistol fitted upside down snugly in his armpit where an ordinary frisking wouldn't discover it. He made sure he hadn't overlooked anything, then snapped out the lights and left.

IT WAS a brisk fifteen minute walk to the office. Jeff usually enjoyed watching the people on the street, but today he was at the office building before he knew it, so deep was he in concentration. He let himself in the office, still too taken with his thoughts to realize that the door was unlocked. It hit him as soon as he closed the door. Something was wrong!

Before he could move, the square man came out of a shadow. He was holding a .45 Colt automatic in his fist.

"Freeze!" he croaked.

Jeff froze. If ever he had seen cold murder in a man it was now.

Kelcy nodded his head to the next room, but the pistol in his hand didn't

waver an inch. "Get going, punk."

A. J. Merton was sitting at Jeff's desk, and sitting across the room, at her own desk, was Jan. Her face was buried in her hands, her body shaking convulsively.

Jeff started for her side but was halted by a growl from Kelcy.

"Jan—Jan, honey, tell me, have they hurt you? Are you all right?"

She dropped her hands and to his amazement she was laughing—helplessly, uncontrollably.

"I don't get it," he said dazedly.

"Oh, Jeff. This is too precious! So wonderfully corny. When does the United States cavalry get here?" she gasped.

Merton spoke icily. "Miss Craig is equipped with an unusual sense of humor. It may be useful to her soon."

Jan went into fresh gales of laughter. "Please—no blindfold—just one cigarette, and then goodbye."

Jeff saw that she was near hysteria. "Take it easy, Jan. It isn't that funny. Why the devil didn't you leave when I told you to."

Merton smiled tightly. "I fancy I moved somewhat more quickly than you expected. Miss Craig was dressed for the street when we arrived. We persuaded her to stay." He made an imperative motion to the square man.

Kelcy poked the .45 in Jeff's ribs while his free hand frisked him. He found the .38 almost at once, slipping it into his own pocket. "I got his cannon," he said.

"Good," said Merton. "Now sit down, Baker. Not that it will help you, but I am curious to know how far your sticky nose has taken you."

"Just curious?" Jeff had that old familiar feeling of tautness. "You wouldn't be afraid, would you, Merton?"

Kelcy kept his glittering eyes on Jeff.

"He's stalling, Chief. The jerk don't know nothing."

Jeff laughed shortly. "Merton, I know everything. And I haven't kept it a secret. Do you understand?"

MERTON yawned. "Miss Craig, if you think I was being melodramatic a few moments ago, this should strike you as really funny. Baker, you're a colossal bluff. You don't know anything—you couldn't prove anything."

"I think I understand your anxiety," Jeff said. "And I'll relieve you of your suspense, but you won't feel any happier. I'm wise to your racket—diamond-smuggling, isn't it. Pretty ingenious. Well-known wealthy collector—no one would ever suspect him—bringing the stuff in, in the vases you collected. But murdering your wife and her maid was stupid, Merton. Don't you know murder is too tough to beat?"

Merton sighed. "I apologize, Baker. I thought you had only animal courage. I didn't know that you had brains as well. I'm sorry you will have to—shall we say, find a better world?—so soon. You *may* be bluffing about having passed this information along. In that case your knowledge would die with you. You and Miss Craig will be put away painlessly. I'm truly grieved that this is necessary." He made a gesture of distaste as though the thought was repugnant to him. "I should have liked you to be associated with me. You would have made a rare partner. Kelcy, unfortunately, can never see any plan of action except direct unstudied violence. It is a handicap, believe me, Baker."

Kelcy was hurt. "Aw, Chief, I—"

Jeff had been measuring the distance. The square man faced away for an instant when he turned aggrievedly to Merton and in that instant Jeff was out

of his chair in a lithe silent bound.

He clubbed the man with a round-house right that had every ounce of his weight behind it. A terrific pain, followed by numbness, told Jeff that he had broken his hand. Kelcy on his hands and knees was fumbling for the pistol he had dropped. Jeff kicked it across the room while he tried to get the small automatic out from under his left arm with his left hand. Kelcy started to get up. Without hesitation Jeff kicked him squarely in the face. Kelcy collapsed, moaning.

A cry from Jan warned him that Merton had retrieved Kelcy's pistol. He finally got the .25 out with his left hand. The two men fired almost simultaneously.

Jeff's shot got Merton in the stomach. Merton's hit the ceiling. Merton doubled up as though he had been punched in the solar plexus. He leaned against the wall, breathing with a whimper.

Jan was in Jeff's arms. "Darling," she sobbed. "*Darling* are you all right?" The hysteria showed itself in tears now.

"Like I was brand new," he assured her. "Get a grip on yourself, honey. The cavalry came."

"Wha—what an awful way to treat a man who wanted to make you a partner."

"It burned me up because he didn't make the proposition till he was going out of business." He patted her hair awkwardly. "Will you call the cops, Jan? That's what always happens about this time in the plot."

JAN and Jeff were sitting in the district attorney's office. Jeff's hand, in a cast, was held against his chest by a black sling. Jan was resplendent with five weeks' salary on her back.

"You'll be glad—or sorry, as the case may be—to know that Merton will live to go on trial," the D.A. said.

"I don't have much feeling about it either way," Jeff said. "But I would have been surprised if a .25 slug in the gut had killed him. I'm much happier to hear that Kelcy's face will never be the same again. The old one was an eyesore."

Jan smiled fondly at him. "I love you when you talk like a great big bloodthirsty killer."

"Tell me," said the D.A., "what put you on to the diamond smuggling in the first place?"

"Well, it wasn't really anything sensational. I spent some time in England and everyone collects something or another. Birds eggs, postcards, water pistols—anything you can think of. I used to know a bank clerk in Sussex who collected this Dutch pottery."

"That's where you learned about the pottery?"

"Not very much," Jeff admitted. "Only this clerk just had a small income and his collection was about three times the size of Merton's. And Merton, mind you, had told me that his collection was about as complete as it could possibly be. That smelled. I knew the stuff wasn't very expensive and it certainly didn't figure to be a rich man's hobby. And, too, you know what bugs collectors are. Give them an opening and they'll talk your arm off. I left myself wide open to Merton a few times but he never peeped. Then when I broke one of the vases and he didn't show much feeling about it, I *knew* there was something unkosher going on. So I used a source at the customs—this is confidential, of course?"

"Like the grave."

"—and I found that not only had he declared the value of the stuff brought in far too high, but that in the last ten years there were about a thousand pieces that were unaccounted for. It was mostly guessing. I didn't know

they were uncut diamonds—although I certainly should have guessed—nor did I suspect that they were baked right in to the pottery. Merton tipped his own mitt when he invaded my office with his trigger man. I'll give him credit for moving fast once he made up his mind what to do."

"Well," said the D.A., "I can't agree that guessing should get all the credit. I think you did a lot of intelligent thinking. I understand the Diamond Merchants Association is going to show its gratitude in some substantial way."

"Isn't it wonderful," said Jan brightly. "They're going to give us all their

business."

"And a diamond ring," Jeff put in.

"That's certainly nice," said the D.A., "but somehow I can't see you wearing a diamond, Jeff. You aren't the type."

"Oh, it isn't for me," said Jeff hastily. "It's sort of—sort of an engagement ring."

"Jeff!" said Jan rapturously.

"Well," he said uncomfortably. "I couldn't let it go to waste, could I? And I don't know very many girls."

"You know all you need to know," she said decisively.

THE END

SAFE-MAKERS BEAT SAFE-BREAKERS

MANY safe-breakers have been working on the principle that whatever has been locked by man can be opened by man.

Drills and gunpowder were introduced into the safe-cracking industry which have been employed so effectively on surface locks that safe manufacturers decided about 1865 to put the locking mechanism on the inside of the safe door.

By the latter part of year 1878, the magnitude of vault robberies stunned the entire financial world. Public confidence was demoralized, depositors withdrew their money and hid it in cellars or buried it in mattresses. Lock makers and vault manufacturers were now embarrassed to no end.

The reputation of the banks as trusted guardians of the public wealth was at stake, hence the dramatic story of the subsequent warfare between the safe-makers and safe-breakers began.

Prior to the Civil War the American safe was a cumbersome affair of iron or heavy wood locked by keys. But the demand for a satisfactory keyless locking apparatus goes far back, however, the first practical combination lock of modern times was invented by a man named Perkins in 1813.

But the real solution to the problem of the keyless lock was offered by J. W. Butterworth of Dover, New Jersey. He planned and executed a working model of the dial combination lock which has been the basis of the locking system of safes and locks ever since.

But the ingenious burglar was not to be stopped; he soon found that the combination dial-lock could be picked by forcing back the bolt.

The old method of lock-picking brought in a new form of bank burglar, the bloodthirsty fellow who tortured the clerk in whom the combination was entrusted. This scheme was highly practiced

from the years 1867 to 1875.

The great invention of the time and combination lock was now introduced which stopped the night robberies and the masked burglar by making it impossible for him to open a safe during certain definite periods even though he did possess the combination of the lock to be opened. Most banks of today are equipped with a triple or quadruple time piece, any one of which will release the combination mechanism in case of failure by the others.

The old-fashioned safe was no match for the puff and rod burglar but in 1885 the Patent Champion designed and constructed by Messrs. Herring, Hall and Marvin made its debut. This safe marked the end of the safe cracker who used powder and a cold steel drill and for two years bank robberies were insignificant in number.

To keep pace with the safe-makers, a new school of bank robbers grew up. Members of this order were tough, exclusive in their friendship, led a life as professional tramps and never traveled with other types of crooks, but were known as yeggmen. This new gang was the first to introduce dynamite into the business of bank breaking and the first to beat the automatic time lockers. Then came the discovery of nitroglycerine made by a yeggman named Michigan Red. The cracksmen decided that two ounces of this soup, as the yeggs call it would be enough to blow a safe.

Trying out this experiment and witnessing the terrific explosion which was caused and having the safe breaker killed instantly, brought about the problem of using a smaller dose of nitro and trying to spare the vault operator at the same time.

Any vault is burglar proof until it has been burglarized.

THE KILLING OF MICHAEL MALLOY

IT WAS in December of 1932 that they gathered at Tony Marino's in the Bronx to plot a man's death. Their intended victim was Michael Malloy, an old customer at Tony's—and a souse of long standing. The boys had an eye on the insurance his corpse might bring.

Each man in the group had a special talent which fitted him for the job. Tony was their natural leader with the experience as a business executive. Harry Green, the taxi-driver, could handle any and all problems involving transportation. There was a former chemist among them. Murphy was his name, and he could be found behind the bar. Pasqua was an undertaker by trade, while Kreisberg was an expert in the field of robbery and assault.

The first thing the gang did was get Malloy properly insured. One company gave them an \$800 policy and two others signed for \$494 each. This made Malloy worth \$1,788, but there were double indemnities in case of death by accident. Malloy was destined to meet death in a fatal "accident." These five were going to see to that detail.

Murphy was told to give him the works from behind the bar. Liquor began to flow freely in Malloy's direction. Formerly his buying ability was limited, but now the drinks were thrown at him. In two or three days, Malloy was flying higher than a kite. They intended to kill him with booze, but Malloy seemed to be thriving on it instead. An adjustment in policy was quickly made. The quality of liquor changed from bad to worse until rumor had it that Malloy was drinking turpentine and wood alcohol. The man with the endless thirst drank on and on with no apparent ill effects. Malloy would stagger out into the night, and the next day the gang would gather to glance hopefully through the morning papers. They watched for an article about Mike being found dead in the streets.

By the last of January they were beginning to show signs of eyestrain while the intended victim still staggered gaily in and out of Tony Marino's. The boys were disgruntled and a little dismayed at the cost of the venture.

Pasqua had attempted to produce a case of pneumonia—all in the line of duty—in the drunken Malloy. He and the taxi driver had driven him to a suitable spot, removed his coat and shirt, poured a couple of buckets of cold water over him, and left him there to freeze. It was a perfect night for such an endeavor. The air was raw and cold; a sleet storm was well underway. Pasqua had tonsillitis the next day. Malloy appeared at noon, chipper as usual.

The boys were disgusted. But the chemist-bar-keeper, Murphy, offered them encouragement. He suggested a serious case of ptomaine poisoning and seemed to have all the methods of producing such a condition right up his sleeve. So a can of

sardines was opened and left around, until the most skeptical had to admit that it was spoiled. Wanting to eliminate all chances of failure, the boys chopped the cover of the sardine tin into fine bits, added a few tacks, mixed these with sardine hash, and made sandwiches. Michael Malloy washed them down with a pint of wood alcohol and remarked that they were very appetizing.

It was in the middle of the night of January 30th that Malloy was picked up by the police and taken to the hospital. Ptomaine poisoning didn't seem to be his trouble. The cops said he had been put in the middle of the road and then run down by an automobile. At the hospital he was found to be suffering from concussion of the brain, perhaps a broken skull, and certainly a broken shoulder—in addition to "alcoholism." Tony and the boys kept their eyes on the Obituary Columns for a week, but Malloy never made the grade. At the end of the week he was to be found at Tony's leaning against the bar as usual.

Michael Malloy's life seemed to charmed. The boys tried an entirely new method of attack. They found another souse, put a card in his pocket with the name of Nicholas Mellory, which was what they called Malloy in the insurance policies. Then they ran him down with Green's taxi, and were about to go over him again when some other motorist happened along and scared them away. The substitute recovered in a hospital.

Thwarted again, the boys became reckless. They were no longer interested in the money, just in getting rid of Michael Malloy. They were beginning to think he led a charmed life, and it frightened them. On Washington's birthday, Malloy was put to bed after he reached his usual drunken insensible state. A rubber tube connected with a gas-tap was placed in his mouth. In the morning, Pasqua, the undertaker was called in. A doctor was contacted and paid a neat one hundred dollar bill to certify death by pneumonia.

Murphy succeeded in collecting \$800 in insurance. When the agents came to investigate he was nowhere to be found. Murphy was in jail with the rest of his pals who were there on various charges. Green was held for carrying a gun, Kreisberg because of a hold-up, and Murphy as a material witness in an old murder. Soon they were all to be tried for killing Michael Malloy.

The almost indestructible Malloy was dug up. The funeral which Mr. Pasqua told the boys would cost \$400, was in the \$10 category. But Michael's corpse was all the police needed to convince them dirty work had been done. All those connected with the crime got their just deserts. Dr. Manzella who signed the pneumonia certificate was convicted as an accessory after the fact and served his term in the New York County Penitentiary. Kreisberg, Marino, Pasqua and Murphy were executed for the murder in 1934.

Never Crowd A Mouse!

By Leonard B. Rosborough

ELMER FINCH felt a faint qualm of uneasiness when the swarthy man came into Wharton's Pharmacy, where Elmer worked, that hot autumn afternoon. Elmer was five-foot-ten, slender in build, a colorless blond with pale gray eyes. The caller was stocky, slightly under medium height, with black eyes, a clipped black mustache and full red lips. He was dressed expensively, a bit on the flashy side. Elmer's mind groped for a word that would fit his general appearance and manner. Oily, that was it. Oily, and maybe sinister.

The clerk glanced toward the rear. Through the glass in the upper half of the partition which divided the store from the room which served as office and prescription department, he could see old Jeffrey Wharton, the owner, sitting at his desk.

The caller smiled at Elmer. "Business dull, eh? You should install a soda fountain to draw the hot weather trade."

"I suppose so," Elmer agreed, "but Mr. Wharton never went in for much besides drugs."

"Remember me, Elmer?"

The clerk looked surprised. "Yeah, you were in a couple of days ago, and I've seen you pass a few times. I didn't know you knew my name. You're Mr. —"

"Just call me Tony. You'd be surprised how much I know about you. I noticed the other day you carry a line of perfumes. I want something extra



nice—for an extra nice little doll."

Wondering, and with growing uneasiness, Elmer set out an assortment of bottles. "You—know about me?" he asked hesitantly.

ELMER Finch was just a mousey little guy and he looked like he could be pushed around easy; but there's an old saying about mice . . .



"Shall I open my mouth?" asked the oily man.

Tony handled the bottles, inspected them, as he answered: "Quite a lot. You're Elmer Finch, twenty-eight years old. You live in a little bungalow out in Maple Heights. You've got a nice little wife named Helen and a cute little kid named Sandra. You think a lot of them."

Elmer's vague feeling of uneasiness became a twinge of fear. "Well, sure—naturally. A fellow thinks a lot of his family." He laughed feebly and made a joke of it: "Anything wrong about that—Tony?"

"No, indeed, Elmer. It's just dandy."

"Well, how do you know so much? Do you live around here? Got a business in the neighborhood?"

HE DIDN'T, Elmer silently answered his own questions. He didn't belong.

"No," Tony confirmed his thought. "I don't even live in Chi. Just here—on business." His smile brightened. "Sort of a citizen of the world, you might say. How do I know all these things? It's a part of my business to know about people. Listen, fella, how'd you like to earn a thousand-dollar War Bond? Easiest dough you ever made."

Elmer's eyes widened. "Of course, I'd like to, but—"

"Sure you would. A nest egg to help send little Sandra to college some day. You're a nice fella, Elmer—too nice for your own good—but you're no fireball, no money-maker. You're just a timid clerk. Period."

"I'm doing all right," Elmer retorted with a show of resentment.

"Okay, maybe you are, but you can use some extra dough, and I can show you how to get it: Jeff Wharton still remembers the days when putting money in a bank was like putting it on a horse's nose. An old dog can't change his habits. So his bank's that safe back

there."

Elmer's twinge of fear became a surge of panic. There was something evil in this fellow's mind. But he managed to hold his voice even and to smile. "That's where you're wrong, Tony. He's got an account at the bank."

"I know," Tony said, with a wave of the hand, "but he keeps a fat roll in the safe. Here's what you do: about five o'clock when he puts his account books and other junk in the little vault, you lock him in—"

"What!" Elmer's voice was high-pitched, his eyes round with shock.

"Psst!" Tony's face tightened, his black eyes swiveled toward the rear. "Don't attract the old guy's attention; it'd be bad for both of you."

Elmer's quick glance followed Tony's. Jeffrey Wharton was still at his desk, an elbow resting on it, the side of his head cupped in his palm. He seemed to be concentrating on the open ledger before him.

"I guess he's snoozing," Tony said, "but keep your voice down, and look pleasant."

"What's the idea?" Elmer asked.

Tony picked up another bottle of perfume and examined it from all angles. "Wharton's been in this business forty years, living in the back room and salting away the profits. There's plenty in that safe, and I'm willing to peel off a nice slice for you."

"It'd be murder," Elmer argued desperately. "Uncle Jeff has asthma—it's so bad sometimes that he keeps a cylinder of oxygen in his room to ease the attacks. That vault's just a small closet—air tight—he'd smother—"

"I guess he would." Tony's voice was calm, his face bland, but there was a vicious gleam in his black eyes. "The money's the small end of this deal, to me. Five years ago he helped send me to stir; if it hadn't been for him, I'd

have got away with it." For a moment his face turned savage with hate. "More than anything in the world, I want to get even!"

Frantic with helpless rage, Elmer choked out: "You dirty *rat!*"

TONY'S oily smile came back. "No good calling names, Elmer. I'll be back a little later. Have my package ready, and put the combination of the safe on the sales slip. Then, about five o'clock, you do like I told you. I'll handle the rest so you'll be in the clear."

"I won't do it," Elmer said hotly.

Tony selected four bottles. "I'll take these. Look, chum, don't be so tough; you should be polite to customers. And don't give old Wharton the idea I'm anything *but* a customer."

"I'll call the police."

"Want to bet? You won't call copper, and you'll do what I say. Now, listen. You're a nice young guy, and you don't want anything to happen to your family. They're driving in this evening from a visit to St. Louie—"

"How'd you know?" Elmer asked in a scared whisper.

"I've been casing this job for some time. You've been staying at the People's Hotel while they're away. Friend of mine happened to come across some of the wife's letters—don't look so pale, chum; the boss might think you're sick and start worrying."

"You might as well get out," Elmer answered doggedly. "I can't do it. It's murder."

"Let me finish, Elmer. There's several highway crossings away out south with very heavy traffic. No stop-and-go lights—just stop signs, and every man for himself; you make the stop, then you ease through the jam. Everything's dandy so long as you've got control of the car. About eight o'clock your missus will get to one of these crossings."

Elmer swallowed the expanding lump in his throat as Tony continued:

"A sharpshooting friend of mine will be hiding not far from one of these crossings. He's got a Springfield .30-30 rifle with telescope sights—and a silencer, so a shot won't make much noise. He can hit a twenty-five-cent piece at that distance. Now, suppose the missus—sorta has a fainting fit at just the right moment and slumps on the wheel and her foot goes down on the gas. See what'll happen when her bus suddenly jumps ahead into that traffic jam?"

The lump in Elmer's throat grew bigger, and a cold trickle of horror ran along his spine.

Tony's smooth voice went on, painting the picture for him: "I hate to think about it, Elmer—the baby screaming, and then all at once it's cut off by an awful crash and the noise of smashing glass. . . . Well, fella, what do you say?"

ELMER FINCH steadied himself with a hand on the counter. His pale gray eyes looked beseechingly at his tormentor. "I can't do it, I tell you. It's murder."

"You said that before," Tony answered calmly.

"Look," Elmer pleaded. "Even if I was willing, we couldn't get away with it. The police would nab me first thing—and they'd get you, too. It's crazy." Again his harried eyes turned toward the office at the rear. Jeffrey Wharton sat in the same position, his big hand almost covering the side of his head, still apparently engrossed in his accounts—or dozing.

"Be your age," Tony jeered. "Elmer Finch a murderer? Try to make anyone believe that! You ain't the type. Your neighbors out in Maple Heights would laugh themselves sick at the idea, and

so would the cops. Timid, mousy Elmer pulling a murder? Nuts! It'll be perfect, the way I've planned it."

Elmer numbly shook his head.

"Listen," Tony said. "As soon as I lift the dough, I'll phone my pal; your wife and kid will be okay, you'll get your cut, and I wouldn't be surprised if you inherited this nice little business."

Elmer swallowed and licked his stiffened lips. "That's just it—I *would* inherit; it'd be the last of a thousand kind acts of his. Uncle Jeff's not really my uncle—but he's been like a father to me. He's the grandest fellow in the world—likes to make things pleasant for his friends; did you ever hear of another drug store that closed at five o'clock? He's remembered every one of Sandra's birthdays. Don't you see?—*I can't do it.*"

Tony gave him a long stare before he answered, "He didn't make things pleasant for me. Well, it's been nice knowing you, Elmer. Too bad my pal won't get my message to lay off. I'll be back for my package; think it over."

"I'll call—"

"The cops? Don't be a sap. You wouldn't know where to send them. Before they could spot my friend's hide-out, everything would be over and he'd be gone." Tony smiled again, gestured airily and started away.

Before he reached the door, Elmer called to him in a low tone, "Wait."

Tony came back. "Get smart," he said. "The cops can't help you. Wharton can't live much longer, at best. But your wife and kid can—if you use your head. After you've locked him in the closet and slipped me the safe combination, go to your hotel and put on the feed bag. I'll phone, posing as Wharton, and have you paged. Then you'll stall around the lobby till time to rush out and catch your train home. That

fixes your alibi."

"It won't work."

"Sure it will. After I lift the money, I'll lock the safe again and unlock the vault. In the morning you'll yell for a doctor as soon as you find Wharton. He and the coroner will decide the asthma finally got him. The cops'll find the safe locked, and I'll leave a little money in it to make things look right."

"But your pal—"

"He'll be near a phone until five minutes to eight. I'll call him the minute I get the dough—"

IN THE office at the rear, Wharton got up, yawned and started out into the store. Tony smiled at Elmer and went out.

Wharton strolled to the front, a plump, white-haired man with a benevolent face. He stopped, stifled another yawn and looked at his helper with concern. "Elmer, you're looking pale. Better go on home; I can handle it the rest of the day."

Elmer forced a smile. "I'll be all right. It's the heat, I guess. And some of these customers get on a fellow's nerves—have to see everything before they can make up their minds."

"Well, be careful; we don't want Helen to come home and find a sick man. She'll think I'm a slave driver. When you're ready to go, I've got a package for her and Sandra. Sort of a welcome-home gift. I'm going up to the corner for a soda; be back in fifteen-twenty minutes."

Elmer was about to call to him as he reached the door, but the dreadful picture Tony's words had conjured up flashed across his mind; a mass of wrecked cars, the mangled bodies of Helen and Sandra. Numb with horror, he tried to figure a way out. She was now well on her way, couldn't be reached by phone. The rifleman might

be posted at any one of several busy crossings; finding him would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. The State Police—could they pick up her car on the highway? It seemed a good idea at first; fleeing criminals had often been caught in such a dragnet. Then he remembered—the criminals sometimes got through the first line; if they did that in this case, there'd be no second chance.

As he looked stonily out through the front windows, he saw Patrolman Monahan strolling along the street, and the sight cheered him. Monahan was an honest cop, as tough as they came. He'd been on the force for years; he should be able to figure a way out of this mess.

The officer and Jeff Wharton met and stopped to exchange greetings. Elmer waited impatiently as they continued to talk. But by the time they finished their conversation, his resolution was fading. Monahan had his good points, but finesse wasn't one of them. His creed was knock-down-and-drag-out; it didn't fit this case. His first impulse would be to collar Tony—and that would be the finish.

No, the risk was too great. The only choice lay between his family and Jeffrey Wharton, his dearest friend. Jeff didn't have many years to live, at best, he argued with his conscience. He might even live through this. But Elmer knew better; in that tiny airtight closet, he'd die in agony.

TONY came back. Elmer pushed the package toward him. On the sales slip under the string was written the combination of the safe. Tony's smile flashed. "Now you're smart, pal. Smart enough to keep your mouth shut, I'm sure. The cops would only ball things up, without helping." He took his package and went out. A little later Wharton returned.

Business picked up, and somehow Elmer got through the dragging afternoon. At a quarter to five, Jeff Wharton came out to him again. "You get out of here, Elmer," he ordered. "You really look bad. I should have made you go before. Better take tomorrow off."

Elmer managed to say, "Thanks, Uncle Jeff. I'll be all right."

When he went out onto the street, Tony was window shopping next door. "Not forgetting anything, are you, Elmer?" he asked.

Elmer looked back and saw that Jeff Wharton was already entering the vault. He went inside, reached the office, closed the vault and locked it.

The vault was no more than a small closet, but the door was thick and heavy and tight-fitting. It was equipped with a key lock instead of a combination and had originally been used as a depository for the cash box, until Wharton decided his money needed the better protection of a safe. Now the shelves which almost filled it were loaded with cartons of merchandise, the books and records of forty years' business, trade magazines and the like.

It seemed to Elmer that he could see, through the thick door, the look of surprise on Jeffrey Wharton's old face—a look which changed to anxiety as he tried vainly to push the door open, then to consternation as he realized he was trapped in a space where his breathing would soon exhaust the oxygen in the air. A younger man could hardly survive three hours in there—certainly not old Jeff, with his affliction.

He tore himself away, locked the street door of the store, then stumbled back through the office and Wharton's living room behind it, and out into the alley. The alley door he left unlocked.

AT THE hotel he dawdled over his food, and finally went out to sit in

the lobby near the switchboard. Through the plate-glass front he looked across the street at a small park. Among the loungers on the benches he recognized Tony, intent on a newspaper. And watching *him*, Elmer knew.

As the dusk thickened, Elmer's fascinated eyes were drawn from time to time to the wall clock. The minute hand seemed like a racing whippet held to a walk, but straining every muscle to break its invisible leash and go racing around its circular track.

Presently he saw Tony get up, glance in his direction and enter a cigar store. In a matter of seconds the phone operator called to him, "Mr. Finch, Mr. Wharton calling."

Elmer went into a phone booth. The voice on the phone was a good imitation of Wharton's: "I was hoping you hadn't left for home, Elmer. Is the operator listening?"

Elmer looked out and saw the operator was busy with other calls. "No," he answered.

Tony said, "Okay, fella. This is your alibi. Sweet dreams, sweetheart."

When Elmer came out of the booth, Tony was strolling carelessly up the street in the direction of the Wharton Pharmacy.

Elmer sank into his chair and looked woodenly into the street. His alibi! All he had to do now was to wait a few minutes, check out and tell the clerk he was taking the next train for Maple Heights. There'd be someone on that train who would recognize him. The phone girl and hotel clerk could testify he'd been in the lobby when Wharton phoned, and had left there only soon enough to catch his train. A good alibi, he reflected bitterly, for the murderer of his own best friend. And there was nothing he could do about it.

Again he tried to justify his act by telling himself that he was sacrificing

one life to save two. Helen and Sandra would be safe. *Or would they?* Would a rat like Tony keep his promise? His mind became a spinning carousel, carrying his thoughts in a dizzying circle.

He looked again at the wall clock; it was past seven-thirty; in less than a half hour there would be no turning back. Jeff Wharton, by some miracle, might still be alive. A sudden decision shone clearly through the fog in his mind: There was no excuse for murder.

He lunged up from the chair and hurried out.

AT THE mouth of the alley which ran behind the pharmacy he broke into a run. Stealthily he opened the rear door and eased into the living quarters, where a thick carpet muffled his footsteps.

In the semi-darkness, he looked around for a weapon. Wharton's old single-action revolver should be in the table drawer. It wasn't—the drawer was empty. He found a small carboy—a steel oxygen bottle. It wasn't too heavy, but it would be a clumsy thing to use as a club. Then he realized with a shock that it could have been a weapon, of another sort; if he'd had his wits about him, he could have smuggled it into the vault when Wharton went out for his soda. It would have given the old man an extra supply of oxygen—maybe enough to save his life. But it was too late to weep over that—

There was a neatly wrapped package on the table. The sight of it brought a sharp stab of remorse. Even in the half-darkness he knew what it was—Jeff Wharton's "welcome-home" gift for Helen and Sandra.

He tried to shut it out of his mind. He had to find a weapon—and there it was at his hand—the table lamp, a slender metal affair heavy enough for the purpose and easy to handle. He

disconnected it, pulled off the shade and silently opened the door to the office.

The single light usually left burning there had been turned out, but he could see a shadow crouched in the gloom before the safe, working the dial in the glow of a pocket flash.

With the lamp raised to strike, he lunged across the office. The lamp swept down, the dark shape swayed aside and whirled. Elmer stumbled, carried forward by the force of his swing. The marauder's fist smashed against Elmer's cheek and staggered him against the wall, still clutching the lamp. The light from the torch flooded his face.

"So you're giving me the doublecross, you little louse!" Tony's voice was no longer suave. His right hand snaked from his pocket, and Elmer cringed at sight of the automatic. He held his breath, awaiting the stab of flame that would end his life, that would end his hope of saving Jeff Wharton—and would mean the end for Helen and Sandra. After this, the vengeful Tony would never call off his killer.

THE shot did not come, and Elmer felt a flicker of hope that Tony was afraid the sound would bring the cops. Somewhere outside, a clock sounded the quarter-hour. A quarter to eight; only ten minutes more in which to call off the rifleman at the crossing.

Tony laid the flashlight on the desk. Through its blinding glare, Elmer could dimly see the swarthy face of his enemy. The gun was still pointing at him.

Tony said, "You didn't stay smart. Now there's four people going to take the big sleep instead of one—you and the old goat in the vault, and your wife and kid." He made a quick sidestep, snatched a white jacket from a hook on the wall with his left hand and started to wad it into a ball.

He'd fire through that to muffle the

sound of the shot, Elmer realized. Tightening his grip on the lamp, he threw himself forward and swung the bludgeon. Involuntarily, Tony threw up his right arm to ward it off. Arm met lamp, Tony let out a yelp of pain, and Elmer heard his gun strike the floor. Another wild swing; the lamp cracked against Tony's skull and sent him down like a sledged steer.

Elmer snatched up the flashlight and turned its beam on the limp form. Too hard! Tony was knocked cold—maybe killed. There was a trickle of blood from his scalp. Now the message would never get through to the man with the rifle. Only Tony knew where to call him.

Unless Jeff Wharton was still alive in the vault, he'd sacrificed his old friend without saving Helen and Sandra. He dropped the lamp and was striding toward the vault door when a sly sound reached his ears. He swung around—and saw that Tony was conscious. He had turned on his side, and one arm was reaching stealthily for his fallen gun. Elmer sprang and kicked the weapon away.

"Get up," he commanded hoarsely. "Get to the phone and call off your pal."

Groggily Tony pushed up to a sitting position, bracing himself with his hands on the floor behind him. Blood trickled from the cut on his scalp. "It's your funeral," he said. "Or your wife and kid's. I've still got all the aces. Unless I get the dough from that safe, and get away, they're dead pigeons."

Elmer snatched the gun up from the floor and turned it on Tony. "Call your pal—or I'll kill you!"

Tony swung his head from side to side. "No dice. If I'm dead, I can't call off my pal. Anyway, you don't want the cops in here now. You're in too deep—with the old guy dead in that vault. I'll make a deal with you. Lay

my gat in the corner, where it'll be out of reach of both of us, and stand just outside the office door. I'll make that call as soon as I get the dough, and you can hear me do it. Nothing doin' while you've got the gat."

Elmer remembered the yelp Tony had let out when the lamp struck his wrist; evidently he couldn't stand much pain. He was still sitting in the same position, bracing his weight on his arms, with his hands splayed out on the floor. Elmer stamped viciously on the right one. His timid soul cringed as he felt the crush of finger bones and heard Tony's agonized squeal, but he kept the hand pinned down with his foot and raked the muzzle of the pistol down across Tony's cheek in a swinging blow that ripped the skin. He raised the gun again.

"Stop!" Tony screamed. "Oh, God! Stop. I'll make the call."

ELMER prodded him to his feet with the gun muzzle, and drove him to the phone. He made a mental note of the number which Tony dialed. He knew the section served by that telephone exchange—a certain suburban district, far out.

A voice came through: "That you, Tony? Did you get the jack, or shall I knock off the dame?"

Elmer jabbed Tony's back with the pistol.

"Lay off," Tony ordered. "Everything's jake."

"Okay. I'll wait here for you," the voice answered.

Tony slammed up the receiver. The tension relaxed, Elmer slumped into a chair. Tony swayed unsteadily, then lurched toward him. Elmer's trembling hand brought up the gun. Tony backed slowly away, his black eyes blazing. When he came up against the door into the living quarters, he whirled suddenly

and bolted through. Elmer's finger squeezed the trigger and the roar of the automatic filled the room. The door swung shut, and he heard the man running out through the alley exit. He swung again toward the vault—but a terrifying thought stopped him. He'd allowed Tony to escape. Tony's pal had said he would wait; now Tony would phone him to go ahead with the kill.

He dropped the gun, snatched up the phone, dialed Police, tumbled words into the receiver and slammed it back onto the hook without waiting for a reply.

He twisted the key of the vault, pulled the heavy door open and reached for the light switch on the wall.

"Stand where you are!" The sharp command came from the dark interior of the vault. At the same instant Elmer's finger found the switch and snapped it. Light flooded the office. He stepped back with his hands raised.

Jeffrey Wharton walked out, a trifle unsteady, with his old revolver clasped in his hand. He blinked against the bright light, ran a hand through his bristling white hair and lowered the gun. "Oh, it's you, Elmer. I thought you'd gone home."

"I started, but—"

THE door to the living quarters slammed open. Tony staggered in, supported by the big paw of Patrolman Monahan gripping his collar.

"I was makin' my rounds," Monahan said, "and heard a shot. This guy came runnin' along the alley. I nabbed him and found your alley door open."

"Good work," Wharton said.

"Aw, he wouldn't have got much farther," Monahan answered. "Got a slug in his leg." He looked at the revolver in Wharton's hand. "Did you plug him?"

Elmer cleared his throat and said hesitantly, "I guess *I* did. I found him working on the safe and hit him with the lamp. He dropped his gun and ran. I thought I'd missed him."

Monahan stared. "Hell's bells, Elmer! *You* shot 'im?"

Wharton chuckled. "Bless my soul! It's Tony Ponzi. Remember him, Monahan? Five years ago I helped send him to the pen for burglary."

Monahan set his prisoner in a chair and studied him with frowning intensity. "Damned if it ain't," he said at last. "He's aged ten years, he's a lot slicker lookin', and he's sportin' a mustache. But it's Ponzi, all right. Burglary again, huh?"

"And attempted murder," Wharton said.

"Murder?"

"That's right. He locked me in that vault, expecting me to suffocate."

Monahan grinned. "Turned out to be an amateur murder, Tony. You should have stuck to your regular line."

Tony chattered, pointing at Elmer: "He's the guy locked Wharton in."

Wharton's eyebrows went up. "Elmer?" he asked mildly. "Pshaw, man, he wouldn't do that. He's been with me ten years. I'd bank on him."

Monahan guffawed. "Elmer locked him in? That's a hot one. Tony, you're gettin' childish. 'I'm surprised he had the nerve to fire a gun at you.'"

"Uncle Jeff," Elmer began, "I—"

"It's lucky you came back," Wharton interrupted him, "and you certainly played the hero tackling this tough character. It's lucky, too, that I happened to have a spare cylinder of oxygen in the vault." His old eyes twinkled. "You'd better hurry home now. Helen may feel hurt if you aren't there when she gets home."

Elmer hesitated, looking from one to the other. Wharton waved him away.

As he walked out, he heard Wharton's chuckling remark: "Monahan, there's a fine, dependable fellow. I'd bank on him."

It sent a warm glow through him and brought a lump to his throat, but the glow died swiftly; if Uncle Jeff only knew that he'd repaid ten years of kindness with an attempt on his life—amateur murder, as Monahan called it . . .

A BLOCK away his steps slowed. A hero, Jeff had said. A heel, that's what. A cheap yellow heel. It would be a burden on his conscience as long as he lived. He turned and started back, slowly and hesitantly and with many a stop. But at last he reached the store, let himself in and went quietly back toward the lighted office.

Jeffrey Wharton was lounging in his swivel chair. Monahan had returned, after delivering his prisoner to the lock-up.

"Funny thing," Monahan was saying, "some guy phoned a tip that a pal of Tony's was layin' for somebody with a rifle. Gave the phone number of the place where the guy could be found. The boys figured the address from the phone number—in the Big Crossing precinct. Big Crossing picked him up—Mike Fiorno, who's wanted for another burglary."

"Who phoned the tip?" Wharton asked with a yawn.

Monahan laughed. "The desk sergeant dropped everything to relay the call to the Big Crossing. When he called the operator back, she couldn't remember where it came from." The cop looked thoughtful and shook his head. "I can't get over the way shy old Elmer waded into that guy, and then plugged him. You'd think Tony was tryin' to steal his wife and kid."

Wharton chuckled. "You would, for a fact."

Monahan stood up. "It's the only way to handle such guys—knock hell out of 'em. I got no use for scientific dicks and their trick gadgets."

Wharton grinned at the officer. That was an old theme song of Monahan's. "I don't know, Monahan; maybe the trick gadgets work sometimes."

"Maybe so, but give me the old knock-down-and-drag-out system. Well, g'night." Monahan went out the back way.

Wharton looked up in surprise when Elmer walked in on him. Before he could speak, Elmer said, "Uncle Jeff, there's something I've got to tell you." Then his words came out in a rush: "You said I was a hero—you should've said a heel. After all you've done for me, I tried to kill you—I locked you in the vault."

Wharton flapped a hand in a gesture of impatience. "I know it, Elmer! I wasn't born yesterday."

ELMER felt a sudden weakening of the knees. He dropped into a chair stared, gulped and finally got the words out: "You knew it? But you told Monahan Tony did it."

Wharton's eyes twinkled. "And may the good Lord forgive me for that lie, but the police can't always see things our way. They've got rules to follow." His face turned grave. "You had a terribly hard decision to make; I'd have decided it as you did. In fact I *did* decide it that way; I'm pretty fond of Helen and Sandra myself."

"You knew—about them—knew I was going to lock you in?"

"Sure. As soon as you did. My supply of oxygen was running low, so I had a full bottle sent over, and sneaked it in the vault while you were busy with the trade. I didn't intend to embarrass you—but now you've told me, let's forget it."

"But—you took an awful risk?"

"Not so much, with the oxygen on hand. Anyway, I came out all right. What else could I do? Tony had us trapped; if we hadn't played along"—he closed his eyes—"I don't like to think about it. You kids are the only family I've got. . . . Now tell me all that happened after—you closed the vault door."

He listened intently as Elmer told him "All right," he said, "but for the record—for the hearing tomorrow—here's what happened: I called the hotel and asked you to come back for a package I'd fixed up for Helen and Sandra." He chuckled and added, "At least the package is a fact."

The lump came back into Elmer's throat, and he had to swallow it before he could answer: "I know. I saw it in your room—"

"That's the one. Well, you saw the night light was off in the office and you thought that was strange. So you sneaked in and found a burglar at the safe. You cracked him with the lamp. He dropped his gun and ran out and you took a shot at him. Then you found me locked in the vault. You stick to that story!"

Elmer nodded. There were no words adequate to thank a man like that. "I don't understand how you knew," he said. "You couldn't have heard us talking—you were back here in the office."

Wharton laughed. "As Tony would say, you'd be surprised how much I know. I've been seeing him around the neighborhood; once he even came into the store. I suspected he was—I believe crooks call it 'casing the joint'. He probably thought he'd changed enough that I wouldn't recognize him at a little distance."

Elmer said, "I remember now that he left when you started out of the office."

Wharton nodded. "That first time he came in, I thought he might return, so I fixed up to listen in case he did."

Again the old eyes twinkled as he pulled open a desk drawer and took out a round black affair the size of a silver dollar, with a thin silk-covered cord dangling from it. "One of those trick gadgets Monahan turns up his nose at."

He cupped his palm against the side

of his head, with the hidden receiver pressed against his ear, and rested his elbow on the desk top.

Elmer's eyes followed the course of the almost invisible cord down the side of the desk and across the floor to where it disappeared under the partition into the store.

Wharton grinned at him. "It's a wonderful gadget, that dictograph."



YOU CAN'T FORGE THESE!



FINGERPRINTS are personal seals, which offer the one positive means of identification that never changes from the cradle to the grave stages of life.

This life long invariable characteristic of fingerprints which is an established means of identification is now used by hospitals to prevent the interchange of infants, and by the government to recognize the honored dead when the horrors of war have torn away every other means of identification.

A prehistoric tomb discovered in 1839 on the island of Govr'inis, Brittony, France showed peculiar patterns in the form of arrows, rings and snakes on its stone wall. These are believed to represent stylized designs of patterns of friction ridges on the fingers.

The Babylonians, in order to protect themselves against forgeries, pressed a fingerprint into the soft clay when they wrote receipts and other important documents. But those were the methods of generations ago. The modern method used today is quite simple. Ink is spread in a thin layer on smooth white paper or a plate with the aid of a roller. The fingerprints are then rolled, so as to show the whole pattern, from one side of the finger to the other. Simple, isn't it? But good fingerprinting requires a certain amount of experience, although the actual process is in itself so simple.

The human body undergoes constant changes from birth to death in every feature except the patterns on the fingers. No two men have ever been found with the same fingerprints.

Fingerprints that are found at the scene of a crime may be roughly divided into three classes. First, there are the Plastic Prints, which are found on such objects as soap, butter, vaseline, melted wax, and the adhesive side of stamps and envelopes. The second kind of prints found at the scene of a crime are Visible Prints, which are those left by the fingers covered with some colored material, such as blood, ink, paint or dirt. The third type of prints are Latent Prints, which are impressions, often rather indistinct, which are left by the fingertips when they touch any object.

Perhaps your home has been ransacked by a

house thief at one time or other. The drawers, chests and closets were upset, things were scattered all about during the thief's search. But the criminal, at the time of the loot, did not realize that his own hands were his greatest enemy, since the fingers met frequently with surrounding objects and surfaces, thus producing evidential markings.

The ridges which nature has provided upon the human hands and feet, appear in patterns that are unique with every individual, an autograph never duplicated, that will often be recorded, since the hands are part of the anatomy exposed to contact, yet the only thing that positively cannot be forged.

Maybe you have had experience with an auto thief, your car was stolen. No doubt, you reported the loss of the auto to the police department, giving them a complete description of the vehicle. After the extensive search was over the car was recovered and it was given a thorough once over by the police department before it was turned over to you. The steering wheel was examined as well as the rear-view mirror, the horn, the gear-shift knob, the dash fixtures, the door handles, the window molding, the windows, the cigar lighter and the radio.

Contrary to the popular belief, the steering wheel is not always the best possibility in searching for the probable culprit's fingerprints, due to the frequent handling of this device. The more promising source of evidence is the rear-view mirror. It is a fact well known to motorists that the mirror in a stranger's car is seldom set at the angle desired by a new driver, who is sure to change its position. For this reason, it often happens that the right lower corner of the adjustable rear-view mirror of the stolen car shows at least one clear imprint of the auto thief's right thumb. After the fingerprints have been removed and analyzed the search is on full force for the culprit.

Finger markings on weapons often determine whether the act was that of suicide or murder, and skin patterns faintly visible on a ransom note may help identify the perpetrator and speed the rescue of a captive.

—Wayne Harris

**[It was a dozen rush orders that
began the weird series of
events that sent Alicia
Hargert into a mess
of troubles**



... ran with Alicia clutched in his arms, behind him a limp figure, being dragged . . .

The Nervous Finger

By Ted Stratton

AFTER that hot morning in early July had passed, Alicia Hargert would remember the series of incidents that had conspired to plunge her directly into trouble. It happened like this. . . .

A dozen rush orders arrived at United Products Mill at Whitney on Friday afternoon and Alicia's boss, peppery Mr. Dornay, insisted that she work on Saturday, her normal day off. Dressed in a new green silk dress that

set off her brunette beauty, Alicia rushed downstairs at home on Saturday morning. One stocking snagged on a chair splinter while she gulped a hasty breakfast, necessitating that she go upstairs to change.

"Two minutes till bus time," her mother warned.

"The bus will be late," Alicia answered, snapping the last garter on the stockings. She checked the seams in the vanity mirror. "Nice," she approved



and clicked downstairs on high heels.

"Bye," she flung over one shoulder at her mother.

"Where's your pocketbook?" her mother asked.

"Darn! On the vanity."

Upstairs again, down like a silken whirlwind, out of the house and a rush up the street. A block short of the intersection, the big Blueliner hurtled past. "Double darn," Alicia fumed, remembering that if old Mrs. Hoskins had not been ill, her husband would have been at the intersection to flag down the bus.

As she dawdled at the corner, a station wagon with flaked paint streaked with red dust swung around the curve of Maurice Avenue and shot up the grade. Stewey Brant, driver for United, Alicia thought. She waved at the approaching car, but it did not slacken speed. She stepped onto the avenue and shouted: "Stewey!"

That did it. The station wagon slowed. A big black Buick sedan swung around Stewey's car and the driver tapped the horn angrily. "Stewey Brant!" Alicia told the curly-haired driver, "you were not going to stop!"

Stewey opened the door. "Sorry," he grinned.

She settled back against the worn cushions. "Had your mind on last night's date, Stewey?" Alicia asked.

"Yeah. You miss your bus?"

"The darned thing was on time."

Stewey stepped up speed and lapsed into silence. They shot past the big black Buick and Alicia glimpsed the driver hunched over the wheel. A quick mile, up Bridegroom Hill and a swing along the flats south to where Stewey signalled a left hand turn into the mill lane. The Buick sedan trailed the station wagon closely.

As Stewey swung the car toward the lane entrance, Alicia screamed: "Stewey! Watch—"

AN OLD sedan parked on the east side of the road shot forward. Stewey cut the wheels hard. Too late. The old sedan plowed into the station wagon and sounds arose of splintered wood and clanking metal. Alicia's head slammed into the wooden roof support. She slumped forward, head pillowed on the instrument panel. Unnoticed, blood dripped from a scalp wound onto the green dress.

Had she been watching, Alicia would have seen three men swarm from the old sedan and surround the wreckage. One man helped Stewey from the car. Another grabbed a tan briefcase off the floor. "Fast!" someone blurted.

Alicia looked up, her mind reeling from shock. Blurred figures swam in her vision. Someone said: "A dame! Why did he—"

"Fast!" an authoritative voice warned.

A man with impossibly broad shoulders and blurred face hauled Alicia across the worn seat cushion. "You're hurting me," she moaned. "Oh, will someone call a doctor?"

Strong arms lifted her and walked off. Loosened hair fell across her eyes and she could not see the man who carried her, but she could feel the wild thump-thump of his heart where her ear rested against his chest. She was moved through an opening and found herself seated. A door slammed. Someone pressed against her right side. Someone else sat down heavily on her lap. A motor roared and a car rocketed ahead in gear.

"You're crushing—m-me," Alicia moaned.

A deep voice growled: "Lucky! No car in sight!"

Silence, except for the roaring engine. Hot bodies jammed the small space. Her vision still blurred, Alicia, mumbled: "Please move off me."

The man on her lap must have eased forward, probably balancing his weight by grasping the back of the front seat, because the punishing pressure of his body eased. "Thanks," Alicia said. "You'll take me to a doctor?"

Something hard jabbed her ribs from the right. A high-pitched male voice snapped: "Eyes shut, babe. This thing could go off, see?"

Sudden terror pricked her brain. Why—why that hard thing in her ribs must be—a gun! She closed her eyelids tight. Rough hands slid cloth across her eyes and knotted the cloth at the back of her head.

The car bumped across something in the road, swerved right. The bump? The swerve? Alicia thought, rallying her senses. Why, the car had crossed the M. & B. railroad tracks and entered the super-highway! They'd driven right past Dr. MacPherson's!

She began to piece little items together. The strange actions, the silence of these men. The bandage over her eyes. She thought back. Saturday morning. Stewey had been at the bank. The tan brief-case on the floor. The United payroll, eight thousand dollars, in that briefcase!

And she knew now that these men had never intended taking her to a doctor. They were robbers! No—kidnappers! And the collision at the lane—that had not been an accident, but a planned move. She remembered the big black Buick sedan that had trailed them. Ominous. Was she now seated in the back of that sedan?

Something warm trickled down her forehead. She put her fingers to her head. Blood? She pressed fingers to dry lips. A salty taste. Yes, blood. She pressed fingers to her scalp, unconsciously brushing against the blindfold.

"You don't hear well," the man with the high-pitched voice warned. "I don't

wanna spoil that pretty dress."

SHE quieted, just touching the bleeding occasionally until the speeding car braked and turned. A right turn off the highway past Whitney? A succession of rapid swerves that flung the men in the car from right to left. Why that meant they were on curving Columbia Avenue, a cross highway toward Barktown!

Realizing the seriousness of the predicament that she and Stewey Brant were in, she wondered if someone might spot the hurtling car and phone the State Police. Grasping a straw! Observers would only stare and say: "Fools! Speeding like that!"

"Turn!" an authoritative voice ordered.

A left turn. The engine labored, then picked up speed. Despite the blindfold, Alicia was able to trace the car's route. They were headed into desolate Orange Reservation on the mountainous ridge above Newark. A new kind of terror possessed her.

What did these men plan to do with her and Stewey Brant? The men were desperate. The gun against her ribs proved that. Would they kill? There was the gun and the silence of these men, a terrifying kind of thing. Would they—

"Okay," the authoritative voice ordered.

The car stopped. "Clear," a deep voice growled. A door opened. Strong hands heaved Alicia from the car. Her numbed legs could not sustain her weight and she would have fallen but for the strong hands which now lifted her.

Faintly she heard a high-pitched snarl: "Bump 'em off!"

Voices in argument. Then for the first time Stewey Brant speaking. "No! You can't—"

"Shut up!" high-pitched voice snarled. "Said all along we gotta bump 'em."

Fear constricted Alicia's throat. This was to be it. Their bodies left to lie in this desolate section. The man with the authoritative voice said: "We'll use the first plan."

"That dame!" high-pitched voice protested. "Jeez, we don't figure her. I'll bump 'em."

A sharp clear snick. Stewey Brant screamed. Then a voice that Alicia had not heard shouted: "Drop that gun! Get the hell off the road before a car comes!"

The man who held Alicia growled in a deep tone. "I ain't for killing. Let's just dump 'em in the woods."

"Kill—" the snarl began.

"Damn you!" authority interrupted. "I'm running this show. Into the woods and fast."

The man carrying Alicia moved. Muscles quivered. He grunted and moved as if carrying her up stairs. Then briars clawed at her legs. Branches whipped across her unprotected face. The crunch of dead leaves underfoot and soft rustles.

"I've got to do something," Alicia thought. Aloud, she moaned: "I'm—I'm going—to faint."

As the man carrying her put her on the ground, she collapsed. She did not move a muscle, yet every nerve and sense were alerted. "Jeez," the man growled, "out cold. That's a dame."

Something tightened around her ankles. A horn snapped from nearby. "Ready?" a voice shouted.

"Just a sec. This damn rope—"

"We fixed Brant. We're moving."

RETREATING steps through the brush. A stifled curse. A second blast from the horn. A rope was wrapped roughly around Alicia's hands. "The

hell with it," the man growled. "She's out cold." The wrapping of the rope stopped. Heavy steps moved away.

Scarcely breathing, Alicia counted. —four, five, six. The horn blared. Alicia writhed her hands. The rope came loose. A car door slammed. She sat up and swept the blindfold off her eyes. The hot sun beat against her face and she blinked in the unaccustomed light. A car shifted gears, moved off. They'd gone! She was alive! She felt like shouting. She did.

"Stewey!"

No answer. A catbird mewed from somewhere close by. Frantically she untied the bandana binding her ankles and stood up. Car sounds faded. A chill shot up her spine, but she called. "Stewey!"

Stewey's voice came from behind an alder clump. "Shut up!"

"They've gone!" Alicia said. She ran around the alder on clumsy legs. Stewey lay flat on his back in the high grass, the sun in his closed eyes and on his roped hands and feet. Alicia knelt and fumbled with the ropes until she had freed him.

Stewey sat up. He shivered. "We're still here," he said.

"Stewey, it's seven or eight miles to Newark. If we hurry—"

"Hurry? For what?"

"The Park police station is on the ridge, remember? They can broadcast an alarm!"

Stewey rubbed his ankles. "Yeah. Look—I could a-been killed!"

"But Stewey, there's time!" Alicia urged.

He stood up. "I risked my life once this morning. I had a gun in my belly all the way out here. I'm through."

Alicia charged: "Stewey, you're scared!"

"Darned right I'm scared. I'm human, ain't I?"

Anger raced through Alicia. "I'll go alone," she blazed, and turning, she ran through the tangle of weeds and brush to the high bank alongside the road. She slid down and a small stone skidded under one foot and catapulted her downward into a heap in the ditch. Car brakes screeched. A door opened and steps ran on the hard-surfaced road.

"You hurt?" a man's voice called.

Alicia stood up and stared into the face of a middle-aged man who wore glasses. "Just bruised," she sobbed.

"What happened?"

"A robbery! A payroll robbery! We were kidnapped and tied in the woods and left to die only I got free and—mister, will you drive me to the Park police station?"

"Sure, sure. It's a mile up the road."

They raced to his light sedan parked on the road. "Where'd they head for?" the man asked.

"Toward Newark," Alicia said, climbing into the front seat. "They've only a two-or-three minute start."

Stones rattled down the bank at their back. "Who's that?" the man asked, as the engine sputtered.

"Stewey Brant," Alicia said. "He drove the payroll car."

Stewey grasped the side of the car. "Foolish," he protested through the open window. "They got clean away. We can't—"

"Coming or staying?" Alicia asked coldly.

Stewey hesitated, then he opened the car door and got in.

THE policeman at the Park station palmed the phone and snapped questions. "What kind of a car?"

"I was blindfolded," Alicia said.

"What kind?" the policeman snapped at Stewey Brant.

"I—I was j a r r e d in the wreck," Stewey mumbled. "Didn't see much"

"It had to be a sedan," the policeman decided. "What color?"

"Uh, blue," Stewey said.

The policeman relayed the information into the phone. "How many men?"

"A lot," Stewey said. "Clipped me on the head and held a gun to my belly! God, I don't know how many!"

Swiftly Alicia calculated. There were clues as to the number of men. Their voices. The authoritative one, the deep growl, the high-pitched snarl and—yes, a fourth who must have been the driver. "Four," she told the policeman.

They listened while instructions crackled over the wires. Newark, Jersey City, Hoboken, Elizabeth, the State Police. Five minutes later the policeman at the phone relaxed. "Got 'em," he said, wiping sweat from his red face. "This holdup must a-been fingered good, the slick way they got away. Inspector Rex at Newark wants you two at H.Q. right away." He noticed the blood on Alicia's forehead. "Better check that cut when you get to Newark, Miss Hargert."

They reached Inspector Rex's office in Newark twenty minutes later. The inspector was a big man with a clipped moustache, a florid face and huge hands. "Good work," he congratulated Alicia and Stewey Brant. "We got a dragnet out and all escapes routes checked. Now if we get a break—" He inspected the cut in Alicia's scalp. "I'll get the police surgeon up to take a look at that. Then we'll study a few pictures."

Rex glanced at his watch. "Twenty-seven minutes since your call from the Park station came in. We figure they'll try to cross to New York and hole up. Miss Hargert, I understand that you weren't tied securely, eh?"

"Yes," Alicia said. "I faked a faint and the man didn't tie my hands." She shuddered. "We could have died up there, inspector!"

Rex nodded. "It's a lonely section. You've done well. These thugs may figure they got an hour or so and get careless. Now—"

A uniformed man trotted into the office, his face split in a grin. "Luck, chief! The dopes tried to cross at 42nd Street. O'Hanlon had three men there. Some gun play. Our boys knocked off two of them."

"Good," Rex said. "Anybody else hurt?"

"No. O'Hanlon is sending the two live mugs over."

"They got the car?"

"Yeah, a big black Buick sedan. Funny thing, chief—no money in the sedan. They practically tore it apart, O'Hanlon said."

Rex thought a moment. "They could have stashed the money somewhere along the road. In the mountains maybe. We'll sweat 'em good." Rex pointed at Alicia. "Look what they did to Miss Hargert."

The uniformed man smiled. "Don't worry, Miss Hargert. The chief will settle a few scores for you."

WHEN the police surgeon entered, Alicia relaxed on a couch in Rex's office and closed her eyes while deft fingers worked on her scalp. Occasionally she caught snatches of conversation. "—a finger." Or—"local, could be." Finally . . . "fingered neat. Only for that mug not knotting the rope tight on the girl's hands . . ."

The surgeon finished. "You'll be all right except for a headache," he advised. "Still scared?"

"I'll always remember that gun in my ribs."

"Don't let it get you down, Miss Hargert. There's no danger now that the gang have been captured."

"I heard the inspector talk about a 'finger'," Alicia said. "What did he

mean?"

The surgeon smiled. "Gangster lingo. A finger tips off a gang about an easy picking." He picked up his bag. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Alicia said and closed her eyes.

She must have been dozing because Inspector Rex was shaking her arm gently. "Feel better?" he asked.

"Yes. I—I guess the shock—"

"Sure," he soothed. "Look, I've got to have some help, Miss Hargert. We took Brant downstairs to identify those two mugs and he was so petrified he couldn't help us. Sometimes," Rex continued, "we have to cut a corner to convict a crook. Uh—couldn't your blindfold have slipped a bit? You know, just enough to have glimpsed these two. It would help. You're a smart girl, Miss Hargert, eh?"

She sat up and thought a moment. She decided: "I think I can identify them. What's next?"

They went downstairs to a brightly lighted room where six men sat on straight chairs set against the wall. "We just stand them up in a line," Inspector Rex whispered. "You pick out the two crooks. Want me to give you a tip?"

"No," Alicia answered, stepping into the room.

"Stand up," Rex ordered.

Six men lounged to their feet and waited. Slowly Alicia walked past the men, eyeing them closely. At the end of the line she turned helplessly. The six were strangers. Still—"Inspector," she asked, "could they face the wall?"

Rex spoke. The men turned. Six backs to choose from. Unhesitatingly Alicia singled out a broad-shouldered man wearing a polo shirt. "This is one," said.

The man turned, glared. "Wrong, sister," he growled.

"If you will check the back of his

shirt," she told Rex, "you'll find blood streaks on the cloth. This man sat on my lap. Several times I ran my fingers down his back. You see, I had been trying to stop the bleeding from my scalp."

Rex whirled the man toward the wall. "Right," he said, examining the shirt. "We'll check the marks in the lab. Now, what about the other man?"

She whispered to Rex and he smiled. "Good. I knew you were smart." Rex raised his voice. "I want each one of you to repeat singly: 'I am the man who would not talk.' All right, you at the end, let's hear it."

Alicia closed her eyes and listened. Once more she sat in the crowded car with men's bodies pressing against her. The hot, humid air. The feeling of being trapped—and in danger. Voices beat at her mind. "I am the man who would not talk, I am the man who would not talk, I am—"

"The second one," she interrupted. "He has a high-pitched voice. He sat next to me in the car and held a gun against my ribs."

"Got 'em both," Inspector Rex enthused. "Smart, you are."

FOUR of the men who had stood in the line grinned, and surrounding the two thugs, marched them off. "You can go home now," Rex told Alicia. "I'll call a taxi and—"

"Isn't there something else?" Alicia asked.

"Something else? No, you've identified the men. That's all unless—"

"Unless I can finger the 'finger'?"

Rex tensed. He moved closer. "You got an idea who tipped this gang off to the payroll?"

And suddenly to Alicia Hargert the picture was clear. A finger! A picture of a gigantic, pointed finger filled her mind. A finger without hand or body,

seeming without the direction of a brain, to point out of darkness and impale her. And then the finger crooked, as if beckoning someone and the crash of metal on metal, splintering wood and moans followed.

And to the finger in her mind was added a hand, then an arm. A body formed behind the hand and a head and a face loomed clear on the shoulders and she found herself talking rapidly. "Stewey tried to drive past me on Maurice Avenue when the big black Buick trailed him. He wouldn't talk on the drive down, seemed preoccupied. That's not like Stewey. After the crash I lost track of him until one of the men wanted to kill us and Stewey protested. When I found him in the woods, inspector, he had no blindfold on his eyes. He saw those four men! Then he hung back and didn't want to go after the robbers promptly. I—I thought he was scared!" she finished.

"I believe you're right," Rex said. "Brant fingered the holdup. It's not much to go on, though."

"There's one more thing, inspector," Alicia said firmly. "The gang didn't mean for us to die in the woods. You see, the ropes on Stewey's hands and feet were tied so loosely a child could have broken free. I didn't understand until you kept talking about a 'finger'!"

The inspector's face set grimly. "Wait," he said, striding off. The minutes ticked off slowly in the quietness. Then Inspector Rex returned. "Check," he said, smiling. "Brant broke after the second punch." Rex rubbed his knuckles. "Quite a coward, that guy! Now what do you want next, now that we've got Brant's confession?"

It did not take Alicia Hargert long to answer. "I want," she said softly, "to go home where a finger is something that belongs on a hand."

THE END.



He moved along, jostling this man and that . . .

FAKE IT EASY

By RICHARD BRISTER

***DANNY Fleck, professional dip,
rarely got caught at his trade—but
this time he did . . . and thought fast***

THE man lay on the cold stone floor of the subway station, writhing, panting. His eyes bulged, and there was a dead shine to them. His face was abnormally red, suffused with blood. His loose lips hung open a little, and he was slavering, soiling his collar.

Around him, the crowd stood impersonally watching, while one of their number knelt and administered first aid to the hapless victim of epilepsy. It was dark in that cavernous tunnel cut from the bowels of the city, and as the morbid crowd watched, Danny Fleck moved smoothly, expertly among them.

Danny Fleck was a dip—which is to say he made a profession of removing wallets from their unsuspecting owners. In younger days Danny had pulled down good dough as a hired gunman, but a series of illnesses had ravaged Danny's slight body, had weakened his heart, so that he had been forced to learn a new, and somewhat less exacting line of work than killing fellow humans for money.

He moved through the crowd, jostling this man and that, while his gentle hands fondled bulging hip pockets, in search of fat wallets. Danny worked alone, having little trust in his fellow man, and he had to be careful. He bumped heavily against a fat, florid-

faced man who wore prosperous-looking tweeds, said, "Sorry, mister," and simultaneously extracted the man's wallet gently and swiftly.

The man nodded, grunted something about not minding a bit, and fixed his wrapt gaze once again on the writhing fit victim. Danny grinned as he moved away from the crowd, and told himself that he must not overlook the advantages of such completely preoccupied crowds in the future. A man with a fit, writhing on the pavement, certainly took the onlookers' minds off other business, such as watching out for their wallets.

Which made Danny Fleck's job almost ridiculously simple.

Danny went up above, blinking in the bright sunlight that bathed the busy street, and inspected the contents of the brown calfskin wallet he had just stolen. There was a driver's license in the name of J. C. Stapleton, an Elks card, a picture of a fat, frowzy blonde woman, and seven crisp new dollars.

Danny swore, violently, as he pocketed the money and surreptitiously "mailed" the hot wallet in the nearest letter box. "Seven lousy bucks. Wouldn't ya know? The ones that look like dough never carry nothin' but peanuts." He made a wry face. "Now I'll have to pull off one more job to make

the day's ante."

Danny never stopped work for the day until he had netted at least fifty dollars. The overhead in Danny's line of endeavor was high, and he always tried to keep well-heeled. You never knew when you'd have to buy your way out of trouble.

HE HOPPED a streetcar up to the next subway entrance, still fuming about the rotten luck that had plagued him all day. Three wallets, and his total take was only thirty-nine dollars. For two cents he'd quit the lousy racket for keeps and go back with the mob.

But even as he told himself that, he knew he didn't mean it. After the series of illnesses ending up with pneumonia that had had him flat on his back for six solid months, the doctor had told him: "From now on you're going to have to take things mighty easy. I don't like to scare a man, but in your case it's necessary. Your heart's been affected. If you nurse yourself along, you're good for years—plenty of them—but the least undue strain or excitement . . . well, I don't like to say it."

"You mean—" Danny snapped his fingers "—I could pop off, just like that?"

The doctor nodded. "Don't run. Take everything easy, in stride. And above all, steer clear of drugs. Stimulants in any form will be murder to you. In your shoes, I wouldn't even risk coffee. Your system lost all tolerance for such things. One cigarette makes your heart race along like a runaway freight car. Imagine the effect of a shot of whisky, or say—something like morphine. Murder!" He flung out his hands, an emphatic gesture.

Danny nodded soberly. "Thanks, doc. I got you."

So he'd turned dip for a living. And

he did take things easy. By playing things cautious, taking no chances, he kept out from under even the shadow of trouble or undue excitement. A guy could do that, if he wasn't money hungry. And this racket hardly even began to ruffle Danny's nerves, after the years he'd put in with the mob as a trigger-quick gunman.

Down in the next subway station, he idled around, waiting for the late afternoon rush of office workers to get started. When they came, when things got crowded up nicely, he boarded a west-bound train with a bunch of home-bound rush riders and settled down to the task of grabbing one more fat wallet to make up the day's ante.

He finally spotted what looked like a nice prospect, a tall, prosperous-appearing gent in a pulled-down fedora leaning up against a pole trying to read the evening newspaper. The guy was absorbed in his sports page. His coat rode up high on his hips as he turned the pages, revealing the outline of his pocket-book riding his right hip pocket. There was a crowd of office girls chattering all around him, and he looked like a dead-easy mark, from where Danny stood watching.

Danny sidled up that way, not looking at him, as if he was getting ready to leave the car at the next station.

The train stopped, another bunch came rushing on. Danny let himself be carried back by the rush of their entrance, and bumped hard against the guy with the paper. As he did so, his trained hands were busy. He got the wallet just as the car was starting up again, giving his sucker another slight jostle as he extracted the leather.

"'Scuse me," he mumbled. "You'd think they'd put on a few extra cars for rush hours."

"Yeah," the man mumbled, not even looking up from his paper. Danny

grinned inside, and began unobtrusively making his way down the car toward the other doorway. He was all set, he told himself gaily, his day's work finished. This new wallet felt plenty fat; it must have at least eleven bucks in it.

His exultation was short-lived, however. Just before the train stopped at Bank Street, he heard his sucker start howling, up in the other end of the car. "Hey! My wallet's gone. What the—?" There was a pause, while the sucker's brain went back, retracing the happenings of the last few minutes. "What happened to that guy that bumped me? Where is he?"

The train stopped. Danny stepped out the door, moving slowly, taking things easy. But his heart was racing, he could feel it thumping. He was in no shape for a race, and he could only hope against hope that nobody had marked him out well enough to identify him.

Then he heard one of those gum-chewing office girls say in a strident high voice: "He walked down that way. The other door. You might still be able to catch him."

DANNY thought fast. As he stepped onto the platform, he suddenly tensed, dropped to the cement floor, and proceeded to give a very effective imitation of an epileptic. It was only an hour since he'd seen the real thing, and he was a fair amateur actor. He rolled, he jerked, he slavered a little, and made his eyes pop out, staring.

As he rolled, his clever hands flipped sidewise, dropping the hot wallet nimbly down over the edge of the platform. Nobody noticed the quick furtive movement, and from then on, his chief worry over, he concentrated all of his energies on his portrayal of a man with a fit.

From the corner of his eye, even as

he rolled and writhed, and drew great gasping breaths, he saw the tall man race out of the other door of the subway, and glance up and down the platform wildly. The man finally went racing up the steps toward the exit, after sending one fleeting glance toward the crowd which had gathered to witness Danny's performance.

"Chump," Danny thought grinning. He knew the psychology of the city, did Danny. He had been pretty sure the sucker wouldn't give a second glance at an epileptic, or the crowd around him. Once again, Danny's quick thinking had saved him from pursuit, from the excess of effort against which he'd been warned by the doctor, that might so easily kill him.

He closed his eyes, simulating a dead faint, taking things easy, listening to the gradually lessening tempo of his heartbeats. Everything was going to be okay, he realized. If you thought quickly enough, you could work your way out of any trouble that threatened.

Something stung him hard, somewhere on the arm. He popped his eyes open, gazed up into the eyes of a stout, mustached elderly man kneeling above him. The man held something in his right hand, and Danny blinked at it weirdly. It looked like a syringe; he could briefly make out the flashing point of a needle.

"Hey! What the—"

"It's all right," the man said. "I'm a doctor. I just gave you a small shot of morphine. Always carry a syringe or two, for these emergency cases. You're going to be fine, soon as the drug takes hold."

Danny listened to the furious thumps of his runaway heart, growing faster, faster, and an oath twisted his hard lips as he scowled at the doctor. "I'm going to be fine," he said limply. "You kill me, doc. No kiddin', you kill me."

FRENCH DETECTIVE WITH STRIPES

By SANDY MILLER

THE first detective bureau in France was organized on the plausible principle of the old proverb: "Set a thief to catch a thief." In 1817, Vidocq, the master criminal, was called upon to organize the Brigade de Surete. Twenty-eight men were selected to work under his direction. All were jail-birds, former convicts, desperate characters known for boldness and cunning rather than moral scruples.

Vidocq had had a colorful criminal career. Wanted for a long list of crimes; time and time again he had escaped from the hands of the police. A man of remarkable daring and ingenuity, Vidocq originated the idea of using men like himself to track down thieves for the law enforcement agencies. He was the most notorious rogue in France when he offered himself to the police as a spy to betray his old confederates. The offer was flatly refused, and a little later Vidocq was brought before the authorities on the charge of counterfeiting. This brazen law-breaker, still undaunted, again solicited employment as a spy. This time his proposal was accepted, not without misgivings and the stage for his activity was carefully set.

With a great deal of fanfare, Vidocq was sent, nominally under sentence of eight years in chains, to one of the large Paris prisons. There he proved his worth so well as a professional stool pigeon that he was allowed to enlarge his sphere of operations. A convincing escape was staged, and the enterprising Vidocq was promoted to the position of "secret agent" at large. On the strength of his old reputation, he won the confidence of the Paris underworld. And all the plots which were overheard by him were reported faithfully to the police.

One of the first exploits with which Vidocq was concerned was the arrest of two desperate ruffians named St. Germain and Boudin. Over a dinner and a bottle of wine they proposed that Vidocq should assist them in the murder and robbery of two old men who lived in a secluded Paris street.

Vidocq played his part adroitly. With seeming reluctance he was persuaded to agree to take part in the plot. Day after day the three met to discuss ways and means. Then, to the consternation of Vidocq, St. Germain suddenly one evening declared that there was a rumor afloat that the other was in the pay of the police, and that his escape had been a frame-up.

Luckily, Vidocq was able to think quickly. He had heard the rumor, he explained convincingly. In fact, he had set it abroad himself to avoid the unwelcome attentions of men he feared might betray him.

His plausible manner completely deceived the other, who at once apologized, and went on to explain that the original plan had been dropped in favor of another scheme which was to be carried out that very evening. The plot involved the robbery of a banker's house. Vidocq was to keep guard outside while St. Germain and Boudin carried out the actual crime—which incidentally was to result in the murder of two persons who were guarding the banker's treasure.

As a pledge of good faith it was decided that the four should spend the day together. This decision startled Vidocq but he was compelled to agree or else reveal his true identity. Informing the police would now be a dangerous task, but it had to be done.

Vidocq's resource was not exhausted. He induced his associates to send a messenger to his house for wine in order to make their day more enjoyable. His servant girl returned with the wine and he was able to pass her a note without arousing the suspicions of the others. She read and then followed his directions to disguise herself and follow them wherever they might go, to keep out of sight, and pick up anything Vidocq might drop.

When the gang set out on their mission they first stopped to buy black cloth which was to be converted into masks. Here Vidocq, who was now in possession of the full details of the scheme, managed to drop another note to the faithful servant girl.

The police were in readiness when the robbers reached the scene of their intended crime. Boudin and St. Germain put up a desperate fight while Vidocq pretended to be wounded. Several police officers were shot in the struggle. Boudin and St. Germain finally lost out. They were handcuffed, sent away and then imprisoned without learning the true fate that befell Vidocq. They thought he had died from his wounds.

Of course, the secret of Vidocq's trade could not be preserved forever, and it gradually leaked out among the underworld of Paris. But he was a master of disguise, and his intimate acquaintance with the habits and persons of thieves made him feel reasonably safe in undertaking his many dangerous missions. He became the principal secret agent of the police with two assistants, former criminals like himself. They proved their worth.

On one occasion Vidocq volunteered to raid a disreputable resort haunted by the vilest and most desperate ruffians, many of whom were wanted men. With his two assistants and eight gendarmes he carried out his purpose, although his superiors had expressed the opinion that it could not be

done without a battalion of soldiers. Leaving the gendarmes at the door, he boldly walked into the noisy hall. A dance was in progress; he ordered the music to stop. Then he commanded the company to leave and, in spite of threats, they obeyed. As they filed past him, he deftly placed a chalk mark on the back of those persons who were fugitives from the police, and they were handcuffed as they emerged.

When Vidocq was called upon in 1817 to organize the Brigade de Surete, there were worried rumors circulated among the populace of Paris that neither Vidocq nor his men were above taking advantage of their position. Vidocq met one of these charges by ordering all his men to wear gloves—the point being that pockets can only be picked by the bare hand.

Shortly after Vidocq was put in command of this new force, his aid was called for in the investigation of an extraordinary murder case. An epidemic of murders and robberies had broken out on many of the highways leading to Paris. A butcher carrying a large sum of money was stabbed, robbed, and then left for dead by two men he had met at an inn.

But the butcher was not dead. He was found alive and was carried to the nearest village where he gave the description of his assailants. Vidocq was extremely thoroughly in his examination of the scene of the crime. He was as methodical as a modern detective taking accurate impressions of the footmarks and collecting buttons and fragments of paper found where the assault had taken place. One of these pieces, which appeared to have been hastily torn off to wipe the blade of a knife found closeby, was observed to have some writing on it. A second piece revealed part of a torn address.

It was with this fragment that Vidocq made his start. It led him to Raoul who lived at the Barriere Rochechouart. This man had a bad personal reputation and his wineshop had long been given unfavorable attention of the police. The Surete kept Raoul under their watchful eyes day and night. Among the men who came to see him they noticed one who corresponded to the description given of the would-be assassin. He limped as though suffering from a recent injury. Vidocq recognized him as Court, a man who would stop at nothing since he had already been convicted of highway robbery and several other serious crimes.

Court was quietly shadowed to his home where Vidocq arrested him and his wife, without, how-

ever, telling them the real nature of the charge. He hinted that they were wanted for smuggling. Next, Vidocq visited Raoul and confidentially informed him that he was suspected of sedition and had in his possession a quantity of disloyal and immoral songs. Raoul flatly denied the charge, and anxious to prove his innocence he enthusiastically aided Vidocq in making a thorough search of his house.

When searching through Raoul's papers, Vidocq's eye fell upon a partly torn sheet. The piece in Vidocq's possession formed the missing part. The close scrutiny of the torn sheet warned Raoul that Vidocq was concerned with something more serious than a mere political offense. He sprang to a drawer in which were loaded pistols, but Vidocq's assistants overpowered him before he could reach the weapons. He was arrested and brought to the prefecture of police for examination. Fifteen minutes later, Court and his wife were brought in for questioning. The prisoners were kept out of one another's sight and hearing, and Vidocq was determined to get at the truth. He put his prisoners through a modified third degree.

Court was told that he was accused of murder—of what murder, Vidocq was careful not to say. Caught off guard, the man actually confessed to the shooting of a poultry dealer. He was led to admit that he was guilty of the attack on the butcher but persisted in the claim that he had no accomplices. Finally he broke down somewhat and stated that Raoul was concerned with the crime, but he would give no further information.

Vidocq stole softly to the cell where Raoul was asleep. He had determined upon an experiment. Leaning over the sleeping man he whispered low questions in his ear. For a quarter of an hour this scene went on. "What became of the knife with which you murdered your victim?" asked the secret agent, and Raoul woke with a start. Vidocq attempted to turn his agitation to account with the news that his accomplice had confessed. But Raoul saw the trap.

Raoul refused to believe that Court had confessed. Vidocq proposed that the two men get together and talk over the discrepancies in their stories. Raoul agreed. When the two men met, Court incriminated his cohort with the blunt statement, "I am glad to hear that you have followed my example and made a full confession." For the moment Raoul stared at him as if dumbfounded. Then, knowing the jig was up, he laughed and congratulated Vidocq. Thus a series of highway robberies were brought to an end.

HOW GOOD IS YOUR DETECTIVE SENSE?

(Solution to back cover)

MURDER should be your answer. The wife could not have died from gas in the manner shown here. The canary would have been dead if the room had been filled with gas. Second, the fire in the stove still burns, and it would have exploded the gas if it had been present in any concentration. Third, a gas victim's face is darkly discolored, not white.

Fourth, she could not have received the bruise shown by falling from the chair in the process of succumbing to gas, and then clambered back to her present position. A supporting factor, not essential in itself, might be the fact that a woman would not proceed to cook a meal while committing suicide.

—Alexander Blade

The READER TESTIFIES

BEST HE'S EVER READ

Sirs:

I have just finished reading your latest MAMMOTH MYSTERY. I want to explain when it comes to writing a letter, I'm just plain lazy, but I feel I should drop the editor a few lines. The story, "The Double Take," by Roy Huggins is the best detective story I have ever read. I don't claim to be a judge of good books, but I have read over 1,000 different detective stories, so I feel I can tell a good story from a bad one. Huggins calls a spade a spade. The way he describes his women in the story gave me a big kick. His plot was good, and the story kept my interest all through. I usually can pick out the murderer in most stories before I am half way through it. But Huggins had me stumped.

To make it short, I have paid \$2.50 for trash compared to the story in discussion, so let's have a couple of more stories by Huggins. Let's see if he had a brainstorm or if he really is as good as his first story makes him.

JOSEPH MAGRATI

Huggins is as good as his first story makes him. He's sold the Post now! But he'll be back with us with more novels.—Ed.

MORE HUGGINS

Sirs:

Just finished reading "The Double Take," by Roy Huggins. I do think it excellent. I enjoy good mystery stories. I trust Mr. Huggins' next book will be as exciting as the above mentioned. I also hope he will keep on writing mystery stories.

MISS HELEN M. SIEGEL
640 W. Willis
Detroit 1, Michigan

CHANDLER IN DISGUISE?

Sirs:

Although not usually given to writing "letters to the editor," I cannot refrain from addressing you regarding the story "The Double Take," by Roy Huggins in the March issue of your magazine.

You, yourself, take cognizance of its resemblance to the work of Raymond Chandler, and I agree that the resemblance is remarkable. Are you not sure that it is not Chandler under another name? Even some of the proper names used are

the same—for instance, Chandler uses the name "Cabrillo" for a street in his "Farewell, My Lovely," and Huggins uses the same name for a couple of his characters, and the whole plot runs along the same lines . . . detective is drugged, beaten up, meets same type of vicious, but very, very interesting ladies, and so on. If Chandler and Huggins are not one and the same, someone ought to be sued for plagiarism. The two men actually look alike in the photographs that I have seen of them.

However, in spite of all that, I thought the story was among the best that I have ever come across and will read and enjoy the same kind of stuff any time, no matter who writes it. Any time I see Huggins' name on a story, I will certainly buy it.

R. C. PAYLER
33-38 Parsons Blvd.
Flushing, N. Y.

Huggins makes no secret of the fact that he wrote "The Double Take" in the Chandler "manner," but who isn't, these days? No, he's not Chandler, and as you say, if he can write that well, we'll read it no matter who writes it.—Ed.

COVERS GOOD TOO

Sirs:

My husband and I are regular readers of your publications. We want you to know how much we enjoyed your January issue of MAMMOTH DETECTIVE.

The story, "Pickles and Jams" was very good.

We also noticed the cover, which we thought was exceptionally good this month. We looked for the name of the person who made it, but could not find it.

Let's have the name of the artist on the covers of your magazine. I'm sure a lot of your readers look for it. I know we always do.

Thank you for many enjoyable reading hours.

MRS. GEORGE WEDRICK
1415 Arnow Ave.
Bronx 67, New York, N. Y.

If you want to keep track of the artist who paints our covers, we always give him a credit line on the contents page. The artist of this particular cover was Arnold Kohn. We are delighted to know you like his covers, because he's illustrating a lot of them for us, including this issue.—Ed.



MAKING YOUR WISHES COME TRUE . . .

One wish has been fulfilled. Won by 3½ years of deadly struggle. With God's help, we have prevailed.

Now we have a chance to make another wish come true. For most of us, the outlook is a bright one. If we will simply use the brains, the will, the energy, the enterprise . . . the materials and resources . . . with which we won our war, we can't fail to win the peace and to make this the richest, happiest land the world has known.

Your wishes have been wrapped in that bright outlook. Your wish for a cottage by a lake. For your boy's col-

lege education. For a trip you long to take. For a "cushion" against emergencies and unforeseen needs.

You can make those wishes come true by buying bonds today . . . buying them regularly . . . and holding on to them in spite of all temptation.

There's no safer, surer investment in the world. You can count on getting back \$4 for every \$3 you put in E Bonds—as surely as you can count on being a day older tomorrow.

So why not be patriotic and smart at the same time?

**FULFILL YOUR WISH—BUY EXTRA BONDS
IN THE GREAT VICTORY LOAN!**

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

This is an official U. S. Treasury advertisement—prepared under auspices of Treasury Department and War Advertising Council

HOW GOOD IS YOUR DETECTIVE SENSE?

Mrs. Smith's husband claims he came home to find her lying in the kitchen with the gas jets on. He smashed the window to clear the house of gas, then rushed out to call police. He advanced the opinion that she must have fallen from the chair when she succumbed and thus bruised her head. He claimed she had been despondent lately, because of money troubles. He revealed that her life had been insured quite heavily. Was Mrs. Smith's death an accident, suicide, or murder? There are at least four positive clues here which will provide the answer. Can you find them? See page 177 for solution.

